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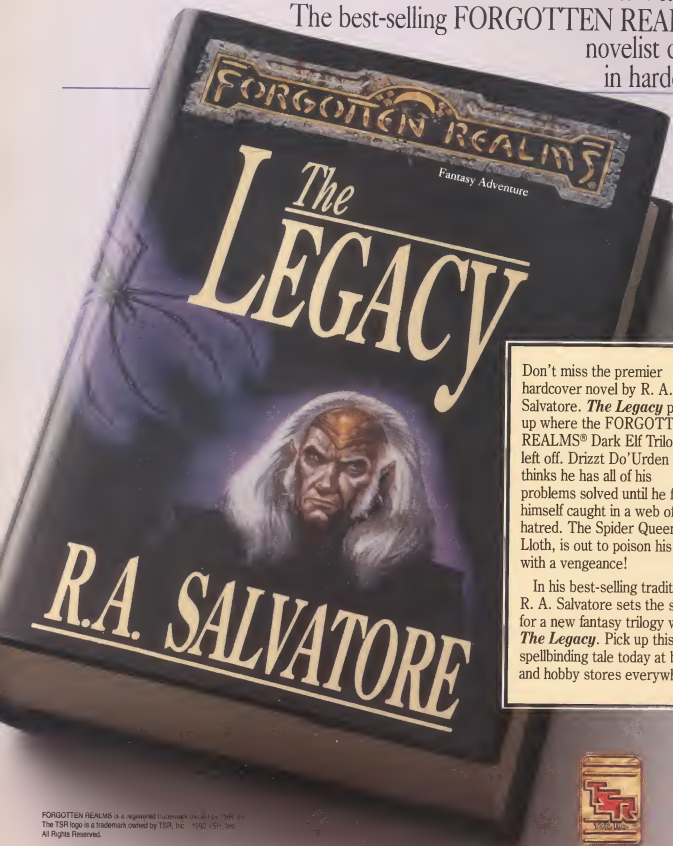


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Contents



9



14

AND THE WINNER IS . . .

- 4** Kim Mohan

REFLECTIONS

- 5** Robert Silverberg

FICTION

- 9** Relics by Gail Regier
- 14** Under the Tattoos by Michaelene Pendleton
- 27** I Walked With Fidel by George Zebrowski
- 32** Green Lawns by Bruce Holland Rogers
- 36** Animal Magnetism by Holly Thomas
- 41** Surface Wars by Jack Massa
- 71** A Troll of Surewould Forest (Part Two) by Thomas M. Disch



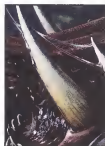
32



71



27



36

NONFICTION

- 35** About the Authors
- 48** Art from the Digitally Assembled Mind by Rick Berry
- 50** The Moons of Barsoom by Stephen L. Gillett
- 52** New Threads in the Tapestry by Pamela Sargent
- 58** Tomorrow's Books compiled by Susan C. Stone and Bill Fawcett
- 66** My Life as a Child (Part Two) by Thomas M. Disch
- 94** Back Issues and Anthologies

LOOKING FORWARD

- 74** Freedom Flight by Mercedes Lackey and Ellen Guon



Cover Art by Rick Berry



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And the Winner Is . . .

Kim Mohan

No matter how many World Science Fiction Conventions I attend in my lifetime, the 1992 Worldcon will rank right up there among my fondest of memories. For the first time, I got to feel what it's like to be nominated for an award. Even better, I was given the honor of presenting an award—and that part of the story couldn't have had a happier ending.

Cut to the big news: The 1991 Chesley Award for best cover illustration on a magazine went to David Mattingly for the painting that appeared on the September 1991 issue of *AMAZING* Stories*. (If you haven't seen that issue of the magazine, turn to page 36 of this issue for a small-sized glimpse of the cover.)

To the best of my knowledge, this magazine has never before been associated with an award-winning piece of art. To the best of his knowledge—and he ought to know—David Mattingly has never before won a major award for any of his work. From where I was standing about five feet away from him as he gave his acceptance speech, I thought I could see tears briefly welling up in his eyes.

And, truth be told, I felt myself getting a little misty, too—because I had just presented him the award. When I finished my speech with "And the winner of the Chesley Award is . . ." and then said two more words after cracking the seal on the card that had David's name inside, it's safe to say that I was the second happiest person in the place.

Several weeks before the convention, when the Association of Science Fiction and Fantasy Artists (ASFA) asked me to be a presenter at the award ceremony, I didn't know who the nominees in the category were—not that it would have mattered, since I was pleased to be invited and I accepted in a minute.

Shortly thereafter, I discovered that David's cover illustration had been nominated—and I found out that I was on the ballot myself, for best art director. All of a sudden I had two reasons for attending the Chesley Awards ceremony, and this magazine had two chances to be associated with an award winner.

I didn't allow myself to get my hopes up. In fact, I didn't expect to win the art director award—not because I'm not proud of the nomination and what I've done to deserve it, but because I knew I was competing with some people who are also very good at what they do. As I said to a lot of people both before and after the ceremony, it was a marvelous luck for me to be nominated—and although it would have been ultra-marvelous to win, I certainly wasn't going to grieve if I didn't get the award.

And I didn't dare to pin my hopes on David's cover winning, because it was also competing with some top-notch work, including *Analog* covers painted by Nick Jameschegg, Kelly Freas, and Vincent DiFate—who also just happened to be the Artist Guest of Honor at the convention. I

did cross my fingers for David's sake, but I really couldn't imagine the best possible scenario coming to pass—that the award I was presenting would go to a painting that had appeared on this magazine. Too good to be true, the little voice inside me kept saying . . . and then it came true, and that little voice hasn't said another word since.

Other memories from Magcon in Orlando will also stay with me for the rest of my life. There was the evening I spent meeting and greeting people in the company of Julius Schwartz, who's thirty years older than I am but has more energy than most people half his age, a frenetic half-hour autograph session during which Barry B. Longyear signed and gave away copies of the September issue of this magazine as fast as Barry's wife Jean and I could put them in front of him, a chance to spend some quality time with Brian Thomson, whom I'm pleased to have as a co-worker now, and an opportunity to meet some more of the winners—Doug Beason, Arlan Andrews, and Jack Holdeman, to name just three—who have helped fill these pages with top-quality fiction.

But for pure unadulterated unforgettableness, nothing compares with the feeling that ran through me for about a half-second right after I glanced down to see David's name on the card in front of me. I still have that card, and I'm going to take the liberty of considering it *my* Chesley Award . . . until next year! ♦

Reflections

Robert Silverberg

"Against stupidity," Isaac Asimov would say, quoting Schiller, "the gods themselves contend in vain."

The gods have been losing a lot of battles lately. The latest buzzword marking mankind's continued descent into mindlessness is *Frankenfood*—the nifty instant cliché coined by one Paul Lewis of Newton Center, Massachusetts, to describe agricultural products that have been created by genetic engineering.

What products does he mean? Chy-max, for instance, a coagulant currently used in making cheese. Since nature's own coagulants tend to be a little unpredictable, gene-splicing technology was employed to devise Chy-max, which makes completely consistent cheese.

Or the Flavv-Savr, a rot-resistant tomato that is going to be placed on sale in 1993. Unlike conventional tomatoes, which are picked when still green and tasteless and then artificially reddened so that they will *look* (though not taste) ripe when they finally reach the market a few weeks later, Flavv-Savrs (from which the gene responsible for making ripe fruit soften has been excised) will be harvested when they're nearly ripe, since they won't turn soggy during the time it takes them to go on sale. They should not, however, be confused with the as yet unnamed tomato, now in the gene-engineering stage, which would be frost-resistant thanks to the addition of a fish gene that has antifreeze properties—thus significantly reducing crop losses.

Coffee plants that produce natural decaf? Wheat with built-in growth stimulants, making environmentally risky chemical fertilization unnecessary? Chickens in which a DNA fragment has been added to make them resistant to salmonella? All of it accomplished by genetic manipulation—employing enzymes to move genes from one organism into another, or to suppress or eliminate certain genes altogether. O brave new world, that has such biotechnical wonders available for its farmers!

But, of course, the know-nothings are lining up in opposition already. "Frankenfood," they call it. Or, with equal verbal vulgarity, "Sci-Fi food." Once again we see the great American consuming public being literally scared silly by the merchants of fear, with inevitable harmful consequences for everybody.

"The public is scared of the word genetic," says Dr. Jean-Marc Pernet, a biotechnologist for the Rouquette Corporation, which is doing genetic research on carbohydrates in Gurnee, Illinois. "We are working on a number of products, but we know very well that developing the technology will be easier than marketing the technology." To which Dr. Susan K. Harlander, a professor of food science and nutrition at the University of Minnesota, adds, "There's a distrust of technology, distrust of corporate profits, distrust of Government regulatory agencies, and general fears about the safety of the food supply." But genetic technology, she says,

should not casually be lumped in with the Chernobyl power-plant catastrophe and the environmental damage caused by DDT and other insecticides. Its techniques are simply a high-tech extension of techniques that farmers have been using for centuries. "If the public understood the technology, they would understand that part of their emotional reaction is irrational," says Dr. Harlander.

What has touched off the current uproar over genetic enhancement of agriculture is the Federal Government's announcement, early in June of 1992, that it would not require specific testing or labeling for an assortment of genetically engineered food products due to come on the market over the following eighteen months. Advance testing will be done, we were told, only if products are altered in such a way that safety issues are raised—for example, if genes from peanuts, to which some people are lethally allergic, should be added to grains.

There was an immediate barrage of protest from a variety of self-styled "advocacy groups" already noted for their anti-science attitudes—led, naturally, by Jeremy Rifkin, the arch-enemy of genetic engineering, who warned of dire consequences arising from the mixing of genes and called for boycotts of the new products by farmers and food distributors.

Can it be that there are certain

(Continued on page 8)

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Reflections

(Continued from page 5)

foods that mankind was not meant to eat?

So say the chefs of some of the country's upscale restaurants, who—always quick to detect trends among their well-heeled customers—banded together in July of 1992 to denounce the new foods and to announce that they would not be allowed into their kitchens. "I am not willing to offer my patrons, my family, or myself as a testing ground for a new generation of bioengineered foods," said Rick Moonen, chef at New York's Water Club restaurant. "I know what Mother Nature intended with regard to food, and I trust in that. I have not yet been convinced [that] bio-engineered foods deserve that same trust." And from Nathan Peterson, chef at Oakland's top-ranked Bay Wolf, came the comment, "Who needs it? And what is going to come along next, tomatoes grown in Antarctica? It makes no sense and it upsets me, especially when I start wondering who is profiting from all this."

Which brought a retort from the other side: Jeffrey Needleman, a spokesman for the Grocery Manufacturers of America: "Efforts to cast genetically engineered foods as unsafe are based on Chicken Little science and are being led by nutritional neurotics. Consumer safety is our first priority." As for the boycott by the top chefs, cynical onlookers have noted that the restaurants where they work would not have been very likely to use the new products in any case, and that the chefs are merely posturing to reassure their finicky, easily alarmed customers. As Catherine Brandel, the chef at Berkeley's famed Chez Panisse, observed, "This type of food has nothing to do with us. Why would we want shelf-life and season extenders, when we can buy fresh produce and meats from local growers every day?"

Not everyone, though, can eat at Chez Panisse every day. Nathan Peterson wonders who will be profiting from the new food products. Here's a brief list:

- Gene-splicing scientists, naturally.
- Farmers. (Including the dreaded Large Agricultural Corporations.)
- Food distributors and marketers. (Some of them Very Large also.)
- People who shop for food and cook and eat it at home.

Note that the list of the beneficiaries of gene-splicing technology begins with the sinister Dr. Frankensteins of the food laboratories, descends through the vile profiteers of agribusiness, and ends with, basically, you. You will be buying and eating riper, fresher, more flavorful food, and the chances are that you will be paying less for it than you do now, because crop productivity is likely to be enhanced and many current-day spoilage problems that cause waste between growing fields and supermarkets will be solved with artful placement of DNA. Grumbling about "Frankenfood," it seems to me, is pretty much like complaining about refrigeration, which wasn't available to the decent farmers and shippers of the nineteenth century and is probably corrupting our present-day foodstuffs with who knows what strange emanations.

I don't mean to say that technology is omniscient and all-benevolent, or that there aren't problems in the new science that need to be addressed. Would the use of peanut genes in wheat, say, affect that fraction of the population that reacts catastrophically to peanuts? Nobody knows yet, and it's important to find out. And the issue of those who observe food taboos has been raised: Moslems and Orthodox Jews, for instance. Suppose genes from pigs were inserted in cucumbers. Eating pork is forbidden by the teachings of Moses and Mohammed: but do those teachings apply to a bit of pig DNA in a vegetable? That would be one for the theologians to decide;

but should the orthodox not at least be warned of the animal content of their groceries?

These are real issues—at least, if you happen to be allergic to peanuts, or reluctant to eat pork in whatever form. But I'm certain that they'll be dealt with in a responsible manner. What I'm concerned with is the fundamental anti-scientific character of the opposition to gene-splicing: the know-nothing hysteria of it, the frantic and fearful knee-jerk hatred of the new. "The public is always critical and afraid of change," says Jerry Caulfield, who heads the biotech company Mycogen. "We need to evaluate risk by separating the probable from the possible." And Roger Salquist of Calgene, which has developed the Flavr-Savr tomato, adds, "The idea that we are interested in producing science-fiction creations is nonsense. We're doing meat-and-potatoes type work to develop food and food production systems that are user friendly, that consumers say they want. It's very expensive to develop products; we're looking for things that will sell."

What will happen, I suspect, is that technology will ultimately prevail, as usual—a hungry world needs every food-producing improvement it can develop—but with a political and economic cost. The know-nothings will succeed in getting all manner of complex labeling rules imposed on food producers, after which the new products will appear, but at a higher price. (If we ban gene-splicing here, which I don't see as likely, improved foods will be shipped to us from other countries that lack our finely developed sense of technological phobia.) In ten years the controversy will be forgotten and the products will be established—complete with the mystifying and costly set of restrictions designed to protect us against mad scientists—and the Jeremy Rifkins of the day will be tilting at a different set of windmills. Too bad. Against stupidity, the man said, the gods themselves contend in vain. ♦

RELICS

Gail Regier

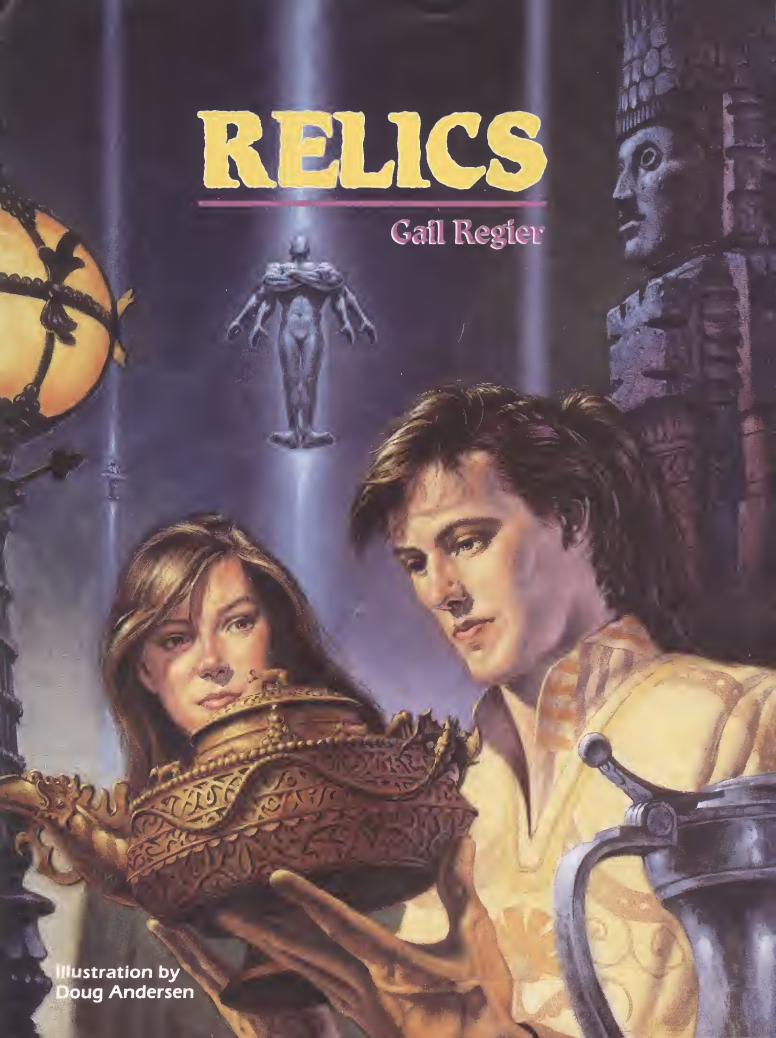


Illustration by
Doug Andersen

Structures dubbed "pancake domes," which look something like a mile-high English muffin, dot the landscape [of Venus] . . . Surprisingly, some of the domes are translucent to radar, suggesting that they are composed of light, glassy material containing substantial amounts of trapped gas . . .

U.S. News & World Report, May 13, 1991

1

All the treasures of Earth are here. I take care of them. Swiss clocks and Persian daggers, Bantu wooden owls, a pillow-sized cake of white jade carved with scenes from Old Cathay. A stone madonna by Henry Moore, so large I can step through its womb. A Stradivarius violin.

Nothing in two dimensions, though; no paintings or books. The Masters can't see in two dimensions. And nothing from the post-Industrial world: no motors or computers, nor even the simplest of mass-produced goods.

Catwalks spiral a mile high under the glasslike dome. I dust, wind, polish, the domes the displays. The golems do the heavy work, floating up the no-grav streams with tons in their arms. They look human, only with no faces and lots of hands. In the early days, when I still dreamed of escape, I watched their oval ships whir into wheels of indescribable color, then fight their way up through the rages of the atmosphere. These days I can't bear to watch them.

The domes are immune to conventional attack. A nuke would destroy one, but any terrestrial missile burns up in Venus's dense atmosphere. And the Masters have defenses: mirror-matter, weapons that bend gravity. Elsewhere, they have colonies inside gas giants. Inside stars.

Exterminating your species would be simple, but very expensive, unless We vaporized the planet. And that would destroy the more promising species We wish to observe.

I'm using words to explain the meaning of what my Master told me. But when He speaks, there aren't really any words, just an icy wind roaring through me, taking shape from the deflections my soul's resistance offers. The shapes are always different, but eventually you learn to read the meaning they carry. That's why, He says, They keep their pets alive so long: it takes a century just to train one to listen properly.

To Him, I'm a castaway's parrot: something to while away the loneliness. My loneliness doesn't matter.

One of my tasks is using a knife to scrape away the crystalline secretions which harden on parts of the Master's body. I'm like that wee bird who cleans the rhinoceros's teeth, though these secretions aren't food scraps, but their equivalent of excretion. But it's not a dirty job; the crystals catch the light like sapphires, and are good to eat. Your mouth flares with the tart juice, and afterwards you feel numb and gay for days. I always know to do that job again when the craving for the crystals begins. Once I put it off. Then the craving crept out of my stomach, filled my head and limbs with pain.

In the old days I was rebellious, and tried to escape again and again. I tried to destroy the dome, but its systems

are protected by subtle safeguards I can't fathom. In the old days I asked questions, even tried to argue.

"I thought planetary changes were very gradual," I said.

On your scale of time. But an industrial civilization triggers quantum changes in its environment. Fundamental problems can't be solved, because the solution is to abandon the industrial model itself. Partial solutions hold back the deluge for a while. Then everything goes wrong at once.

These star-rovers know how planetary systems work; They've had millions of years to learn, and all space for Their laboratory. They understand the workings of continental drift, of animal migration; of global warming, soil exhaustion, radioactive waste. Their software predicts earthquakes and storms I hear about months later from Earth TV. They name our race with an icon that feels like a knot of birds fluttering in all directions. The icon means *the suicides*.

No industrial race ever survives very long. Sometimes they go interstellar, fouling planetary systems and then moving on. Nomadic vermin.

"What happens then?"

A month passed. By then I was used to Their time sense, so I recalled the question when His answer came:

Differences are put aside, and the civilized races hunt the gypsies down. Very expensive.

"Are some preserved—like in zoos?"

They would just repeat their pattern. He falls silent for a year or two, then adds: Not that it matters with your species. You're too close to Apocalypse to ever reach the stars.

"Can't you save us?"

A day.

We'd have to take care of you forever.

And why, after all, should They do that? Why would They need a whole planet full of pets? A few of us will survive, until the last human dies some century. They never breed Their pets. One not taken in the wild lacks savor.

Last year I asked, "What traits does a star-roving species need to survive?"

Longevity. He answered. And discipline. The rest takes care of itself.

2

Someone new is here. A human. I've heard her crying.

3

For a few years I stay away. The golems show me a digital of her, but for some reason the image is blurred. Let her meditate till some of the shock she must feel is gone. If she can't do that, she won't survive here anyway.

When I do go to her, she sits slumped in a corner of her habitat, her arms crossed, listlessly rubbing her palms across her elbows over and over. She stares, not knowing if she should run to me or away.

"You're real," she says at last. "You're human . . ." The ending not quite a question mark.

She speaks English, a language I know from TV. "My name is Bassim," I say.

"I'm Jessie." She starts laughing, and tears run down her cheeks. "This is mad," she pants. "I finally see a human . . . and we *introduce* ourselves."

I wait for her to get her bearings. Patience is one thing I have. She wants to know where we are, and when I tell her she starts crying and screaming and pounding the wall. Her worst fears realized. I keep my distance, eating some fruit from the trough, scooping a palmful of water from her fountain and bringing it to my mouth. Where the drops fall on the floor they vanish instantly, something I'm so used to I notice it only because this new human is with me.

When she calms down, the questions start. She understands the situation much better than I did when I was first Taken; she's the daughter of a technological civilization. But she has the arrogance of that, too, and doubts anything I can't explain the reasons for. Tomorrow I'll show her everything. When she sees the collections—and the Master—she'll understand. The Master is larger than the idols of Old Egypt, and more ancient.

"Why tomorrow?" she demands. "Why not now?"

"I have to work now." At her blank look I add, "I look after the relics. The human artifacts the Master has collected."

Now the questions spring from her like arrows. "Are we the only ones here? What ways are there to escape? Who are the Masters? What do they want?"

"You might think of the Masters as . . . collectors. Antiquarians."

"Holy God," she says. Hysteria edges into her voice again, but she doesn't move. "Holy God." Her arms keep shifting, trying to cover herself as best she can. I realize that being naked frightens her, and I open the wall and toss her the first clothing that comes to hand. As she scrambles into it, I realize I should have turned my head while she dressed. Human ways come so slow to me now.

Jessie stares at the monitors, the data banks. Earth TV flickers on dozens of screens.

"It doesn't make sense," she says. "You say they can only see shapes and textures, not color and shade. Are these all for us?"

Farther down are the Master's data banks, the tactile globes whose contours ripple with meaning. For centuries I kept my hands on them, feeling my way into the language. Now I can read their ooze and flutter by eye.

This evening she joins me on the catwalks, wearing a long gown. The abrasions she got when the golems grabbed her are healing to smooth skin. I show her our tasks, leading her through the myriad displays like a surreal butler. She stares at the racks of carved and gemmed artifacts, at a chandelier the size of a carriage. But her thoughts are still back on Earth.

"And you think that's good enough—that humanity will die out, but these collections will be saved?"

"The Masters take a long view," I say. "We're a tool-making species; our best works will be our legacy. What do we have from the Mayans, the Etruscans? From the people of Angkor Wat? We have the things they made."

I rub some polish onto a silver platter, caress it with a chamoise. French ware, from the sixteenth century, adorned with dolphins. Lovely.

"Give me that." She takes the silver and polish from me. "You're just messing it up." Her hands seem glad for something to do after all that time in the bare habitat. Not good for a tool-making animal. "These are terrible. Can't you see where the black is?"

"My vision is bad sometimes. Things go blurry."

"All this time alone . . . I can see how it's made you crazy. Not that I really believe it's been six hundred years." Then the thought strikes her. "Or *were* you alone? Have there been other humans here?"

"Yes."

"Yes? You mean Yes? Why didn't you tell me?"

"I don't know. I didn't think about it."

She lowers her voice, as if silence were important.

"What happened to them?"

"Maria used a noose. Tsu found a way to poison himself. Blackamon got at the wheel-lock guns, and killed some golems before they nailed him. That's when the Master put those displays under His own key."

Jessie's breath hisses out slowly. I don't look up.

"Blaise went out the lock. That's a quick way to do it. Nine hundred atmospheres out there, you know. Five hundred degrees. A terrestrial body just turns into slush."

I put the cellar back under glass, glance up at her. I know my face is calm. Hers is a scream of fear.

The next stage is long talks. We dine at a low table, crosslegged in kimonos. I saute delicacies at the sideboard. But nothing distracts her.

"What animals do they have hopes for, if not humans?"

"Octopuses," I say. "That's why we never eat them."

They might make it, if humans don't wreck the ocean."

"How can aquatic animals become star-rovers?"

"I don't know. The Masters say it's pretty common."

"Quit calling them that."

"The Masters? Oh, but They are." I'm tired and edgy with her denials, though I remember thinking the same myself once.

"You're bloody hopeless," she says.

She swallows her last bite of truffles, wipes her lips with a square of embroidered linen.

"How do you know it tells you the truth?"

"Would you bother to lie to your puppy?"

"Does the butcher show the pig his blade?"

I don't argue with her. Time will show her truth in a way words never could.

"There are some microorganisms They like."

"Micro—you mean *germs*?"

"They get larger as they evolve. I've felt images of them. Gossamer things, like butterfly wings a parsec wide. . . ." I don't try to describe them. She's not ready to hear this yet, not ready yet to fall in love with unearthly beauty.

"They live out in space, between the galaxies."

"In space."

"Uh-huh."

"Between the galaxies."

"Uh-huh."

"Whatever." Her legs lie open, spreading the kimono, and her fingers are busy in the pink throat between her pelvic fleece. I don't bother not to watch; by now I know her moods.

"Come here," she says. "I want you to do something for me."

I try, but it's so hard for me to initiate anything. The years have done that to me, and the crystals, I guess. In any event she does everything, and the lightning she conjures leaves us both soaked and panting.

Afterward she says, "I hate you, you know."

I say, "I know."

"They're not interested in species that have stopped evolving," I say. Jessie drifts in her hammock, paying no attention. She won't talk or bathe or eat. She lies around for weeks, while I do her work.

"There are two ways to stop evolving. Some species fit so well into an ecological niche that they reach perfection. Sharks are like that. Alligators. Bees. These species survive only so long as their niche remains unchanged—and for certain don't outlive their star's nova, which is the first crisis in a race's history. . . ."

"You're mad." Her voice creaks with disuse. "This is all mad. This place is mad. . . ."

For a while we're quiet. Then she stirs, half sits up, rubs her arms to get the circulation going. Her hair is matted. Her eyes are wild.

"What's the other way?"

"The other way is to use technology to alter the environment. But tool-makers have to learn self-discipline, or they destroy themselves. All that remains are relics. . . ."

"How do you know?" she hisses.

"They know."

"But they're our enemies," she says. "They're monsters from outer space. They've brainwashed you, here alone all these years."

She comes close, touches me, and the strange feelings start again. I lie back and let her bring the lightning. She sleeps in my arms this time, for a little while. She needs rest. Her eyes are rimed with black.

"Why don't you ever . . ." Her voice comes out of sleep.

"What?"

"Ever do anything. Ever get involved."

I can't answer that. But it seems important to her, so I say, "I like it when you do it."

"We have to work together," she says. "You know where everything is. You can help me steal a ship."

I come to my knees, start my stretching exercises. My whole body feels warm and good. I wish she would do sex to me again. But she won't do it if I ask her.

"I was like you, in the early days. Then I found peace. You think this is Hell. But you get used to it."

"You're not human," she shrills. "You don't talk like a man, you don't think like one, you think like a *thing*. You eat its shit. You drug yourself with its shit."

She kicks at me, kicks again. I roll into a ball, while she tears my flesh open here and there. In the dome, all wounds heal quickly. I close my eyes and soak up the pain.

4

Years go by. For you. Here it does not matter. This is the treasure house of the faëry king, where time stops.

5

"Tell me again," Jessie whispers, "about Spain."

"It's difficult. My memory is so . . . soft."

Jessie sprawls across my splayed legs, chin on calf, elbow in the moon of my knee. All her muscles are loose. Sweat, smooth as oil, binds us. She slinks a finger around inside her mouth, then draws the nail down my sternum.

"You," she says. "I . . . love . . . you."

I'm afraid to speak. I say:

"I can't remember much about Earth. Everything was bigger, heavier, and I was frightened all the time. I played in mud and offal, cuffed by orange peddlers, booted aside by strolling soldiers. But I played in the shadow of palaces. The mosques were built of pink-veined marble, their narrow windows screened with latticework of bronze. The towers rose to domes, white against the blue sky."

"Blue skies," she whispers. Tears soften her cheeks.

"My father was a potter, and we were poor. There were lots of us kids. When I stood waist-high to a man, he sold me to a Christian who was . . . there's no word in English. He was sort of a pimp for beggars. He used fire and an iron bar to cripple children so they looked particularly ugly. Then he set us to begging, and made us give him the money."

Jessie is looking at me in horror.

"After that, things were always bad. I slept in the streets, and was always sick. One winter night I went out to the wharf, to jump in the sea and end it. But instead I was Taken.

"Here in the dome, I healed. The years straightened my crooked limbs. After that it was very tedious, and I thought about going through the airlock. But then the Master learned to speak to me, and He started collecting the relics. So then I had work to do."

"All those years you've lived," Jessie whispers. "Your thinking is . . . strange. In some ways, you're as alien to me as your master is. You don't miss Earth. And you care so much about the Master's toys."

"The relics are our immortality. Can you see what that means? That humanity will live on—in a sense?"

"I want *me* to live on," she says. "Not some dusty relics." Her features set in a solemn mode. "Bassim, have you ever considered that . . . things aren't what you think?"

"When you first came, you didn't believe—"

"Yes, years ago, that's not what I mean. I know we're on Venus. I know we're the captives, the pets"—she shuddered with the shame she always felt—"of a space-traveling creature. But it isn't what you think. The Master doesn't collect anything. You do."

Usually I'm patient with her absurdities and denials. But this, for some reason, I can't bear to hear. Sweat breaks out on my forehead. I open a glass case and fool with the coins displayed there.

"You don't know what you're talking about, Jess."

"Listen. The Master never pays any attention to the relics. It meditates on the landscape, near as I can tell. It communicates with others through the tactile globes. It studies the planets themselves—not just Earth, but the others in the solar system. It isn't interested in humans."

"Shut up."

She's startled, but she likes my anger. She drills forward: "Look at the things the golems bring back. They reflect *your* taste, Bassim. That newest thing, the ivory box that opens to bas-reliefs of the saints in heaven. It's *you*, Bassim. *You're* the collector."

Her voice gnaws at me, like a worm of ancient guilt, unyielding. I sit in a corner of rock below the fountain, letting the mist dapple me. I curl into a fetus, try to shove her voice away.

"... the Master doesn't *talk* to you; how would that work? The species are so different. We can't talk with animals—and they're our first cousins, by comparison with an organism from a separate evolutionary stream. Bassim, that Nazi voice is just in your head."

My head feels hot and swollen, as if my brain would burst. My muscles tremble, and anxiety writhes in my arms and chest. I pray for the void of the deaf. But her voice goes on.

"It knows what you want, sort of; that's obvious from the way things happen here. It wants you to be happy."
"No..."

"You told me there were no books here. But there are—old handwritten ones. You know Latin. Why don't you read them?"

"I... I like TV."

"You don't! You can't see it. I've watched you. You listen to the audio, and your mind makes up pictures, but you can't see the screen. When we talk about the shows, you don't make sense."

The pain in my chest is worse. "What are you saying?"

"Look at me, Bassim. What color is my hair?"

I can see the color, but it keeps flickering and changing. On Venus things change color often. Don't they?

"Look at my face, Bassim. Can you see my face?"

"Of course. Your nose turns up. Your ears are small."

"And the scar on my cheek?"

"The scar?" Is there a scar? Was there?

"You told me they don't see flat surfaces. You've been with Him so long, it's changed you. Your optic nerves are okay, I imagine. But the coding in your mind refuses the signals. An attempt to imitate the Master."

I've had enough. The pain in my head feels like it will split me open. A golem appears, mysteriously obedient to my desire. He drags her away.

The next months are too hard to tell. I don't go near the relics, but the Master doesn't seem to notice. I can't hear His voice anymore. I spend hours staring at objects, making the colors come and go. My tears wear hollows down my cheeks; my hands ache from always being clenched. I walk my dungeon, aching, lost in a timeless pain.

Comes the day when I let Jessie out of her habitat. What isolation has done to her, I dread seeing. But she seems the same, only thin and wan, like an icon of a

saint in waiting. I'm braced for hate, but none shows in her posture.

"I've been reading the tactile records," I say. "There's nothing on human culture. Only geological data."

She nods.

"According to the records, it's not true that industrial civilizations never mend their ways. If they have enough data on how the planet works, then they might change."

She nods.

"Technology—I think I just don't like it. I like handmade things so much. They're so beautiful, and all different."

I open my hands, and something flows between us. She comes into my arms.

"You've been in this cage so long," she says. She kisses me, smooths my tears with her cool hand. "You had no power. You had to believe you were doing something useful—preserving the relics of doomed humankind." Her voice goes soft. "And perhaps you were."

"There are things that can be done. I don't think the Master minds humans knowing what they need to know." I shake my head to clear it. "I can't watch TV anymore. And your eyes, your skin, I can't... see the colors. Only the contours. I'm blind."

"You've begun to see."

We spend months in the archives, translating data from the Master's tactile globes into the digital computers. A hard task, but working beside Jessie makes it easier, and our nights are easier too, as she patiently teaches me how to take a hand, how to reach out for what I want. When the translating is through, she has to push me again.

"Tell the Master to open the data banks, Bassim. Tell it to send ecological data to Earth."

"I can't order Him..."

"He's not a god, Bassim."

Oh, but He is, I don't say.

"Bassim—he knows what you want. He always has. All you have to do is concentrate. All you have to do is be clear in your heart."

"But why would He..."

"He loves you," she whispers. "Don't you know why he brought me here? He knew you needed a woman. Not companions, like last time, but a woman for you. A mate."

Brightly, she strokes the fingertips of one hand against my brow.

I stare at the monitor screens. Colors chase across them, images from all nations. A dolphin leaps—but do I really know what a dolphin looks like? Skyscrapers—but could they really be that tall? I concentrate until the swelling in my head seems to break and bleed, and the monitors become squares of glass, smooth and featureless.

Behind me, Jessie gasps. "What's happening?" I ask.

"Data's rushing across the screens... so fast! Human languages, human mathematics. Human graphics." She sighs and slumps against me. "I wish you could see it."

Soon the audio on the monitors lets us know that Earth has heard us. Technicians scramble, stunned by the rain of data from space. Soon every scientist and policy maker on Earth will be caught up in the adventure. Soon they will have to face the truth. ♦

Under the Tattoos



Michaelene Pendleton

"Oh, shit . . ." Carlos's voice came tinny through the helmet com. Atmosphere shrieked against the assault lander's skin, bumping the sneak-pod around like an ancient ship on a storm-tossed sea.

You could hear Delta's grin in her voice. "Hang on, shagger. It gets better."

Eyes squinting and teeth clenched from the gees of the drop, Turk gripped the edges of his foam cocoon and said nothing. First drop or fiftieth, it

Illustration by Doug Chaffee

never got any easier. Ten seconds of fuel for the sneak-pod's attitude jets, and if the computer screwed up, Scorpion Assault Team-832/IX would be smeared over fifty square kilometers of alien landscape with nothing to show for it but a line on a memorial plaque at Tac-Com Headquarters.

Delta always got a little crazy on drop. Turk got sick. He concentrated on swallowing and not puking as the pod slipped sideways and down, jolting his back teeth together and leaving his stomach in low orbit.

Carlos changed to "Oh, God . . ."

"Go with it, shagger. Best ride you'll ever have. And it don't cost nothing." Delta's laugh was rich and warm. "Thought you First-In troops were tough buggers."

The banshee scream of the ship abrading against thickening atmosphere drowned out Carlos's moan. The sneak-pod's jets thundered as they went ballistic. Turk tucked his chin on his chest, fixing his eyes on the seconds to touchdown readout on his helmet flatscan. At forty seconds, the sneak-pod leveled out, bending into a smooth softdown trajectory. Turk's stomach caught up with his armored body. The pod touched down like a stork delivering a baby.

Turk slapped his web release, slipping his arms through his weapons harness as he slid out of his cocoon. His metal-soled boots clanged on the deck.

Carlos was tangled in his jump webbing and Delta was hollering, "Move it, move it, move it, dimwad!" She pulled Carlos out of his cocoon. "We got three minutes before this heap melts down to puddles. Move your butt. Turk, you go right. I'll bring the shagger."

Clicking buckles and settling the harness on his back, Turk hit the hatch servo. Hydraulics whined as the hatch began to lift. Turk jammed it open with one shoulder and jumped, humped right as soon as he hit the ground.

He went into a crouch and swung the muzzle of his Volkhov Spitter in a semicircle, taking a quick one-eighty of the area surrounding the sneak-pod. Nothing moved in his vision or his autoscans. Just a wide grass plain edged with a grove of thick, twisted-trunk trees. "Clear field right," he snapped. He heard Delta and Carlos clanging out of the pod and Delta's voice echoed, "Clear field left. Break."

Then they were scrambling for cover. Turk made a hundred-meter run in close to record time and threw himself behind a large downed tree trunk. Delta and Carlos were on his tail. "Mark in ten," Delta said. "Keep your heads down, babies."

The pod detonated with a concussive *WHUMP*, showing the area with white-hot slabs of its outer skin, magnesium-cored shards that fizzed and sparked and burned away to nothing but drops of liquid metal, setting off small fires in the long yellow grass. The interior of the pod was blasted into a slagheap of unidentifiable scrap, no single piece large enough to tell an enemy any details about its use or construction.

With adrenalin flushing his veins and the explosion ringing in his ears, Turk took a deep breath. He knew his grin was visible through his face shield. "Damn, I love this job."

Delta swatted him on the shoulder, her grin as wide as his own. "You gotta get a new line, Turk. You say that on every drop."

"Shit," Carlos said.

According to Delta's link to the orbiting spysat, the pod had set them down precisely on target, sliding in through a gap in the planet's telemetry net, dropping them at the demarcation line between a huge dry plain of tall grass and a forest that sheltered the habitats of the local sector governing settlement, an area Tac-Com said registered no human life. They had sixty kilometers to cover, a dozen or so officials to assassinate, and not much time. Fleet troopships were mass landing at planetary dawn in two days and Scorpion 9 had only that long to disrupt local response effectiveness.

Fleet Tac had used the westerling sun as cover for the drop, and a lavender darkness was starting to come on. Scorpion 9 made off into the forest, strung out with Turk on point, slipping like wraiths through the underbrush, their chameleon battle armor taking on the dark, dappled brown and blue-green of the long-needed trees.

Turk opened his helmet filters. He smelled the slightly bitter tang of the trees, the rich, fungal odor from the forest floor, and the peppery tinge of the blue lichen that crawled over scattered granite boulders; but nothing that indicated any human presence, no reek of carboufels or degrading plastics. His helmet heads-up readouts pinpointed small flashes of animal life fleeing his intrusion. The power-use scan was flatlined.

He thumped his helmet with his knuckles, but the scan stayed flat. "Delta, you read any juice?"

"Nada, Turk."

"I thought we were being inserted close to a habited area."

"That's what Tac-Com said."

"Huh." Underneath his armor, Turk was getting a crawly feeling up the back of his neck. He checked the ready light on his Volkhov and moved on.

Just after Turk switched to his night vision, the trees thinned out. He called Delta and Carlos up. "We got something here."

A sixty-meter clearing had been chopped out of the trees. Most of it was taken up with neat, regular rows of cultivated plants. At the far side, a round stone well fronted a small wooden house with quartered plas-paned windows, a solid door, and a porch running the length of the structure. The roof looked to be layered in slabs of slate. A tall stone chimney was built into the east wall. A large barn, windowless, walled and roofed entirely with half-round logs, hunched to the west of the house inside a fence of split railings.

"What do you make of that?"

Delta shook her head and trained her implanted eyes on the buildings. "I pick up infrared readings from the barn consistent with animal life. Nothing from the house."

Turk double-scanned the area. "Not a sign of power use anywhere. Strike you as a bit odd?"

Delta's wedge-shaped helmet reflected a shine from the rising moon as she nodded. "It does, it does. We got

us a little mystery here, Turk. One thing sure, though, if they got livestock, someone is going to show up sooner or later."

Turk nodded. "AOP, Com."

They planted a fullscan pickup to relay any activity at the house and set up camp among the trees eighty meters from the clearing. Turk ringed a twenty-meter circle with shield units while Delta doled out six of their Sprengmines to Carlos to lay just inside the shield wall, suggesting that he make sure the side that exploded was pointed at the enemy. Turk set up a fist-sized glow globe that illuminated their camp with infrared that showed up green on their night visors.

They ate, Turk offering his usual silent gratitude to the Fleet Doc who had invented psychogenic rations. His mouth told him he was eating a mealy paste, but his brain told him it was steak and roast tubers swimming in rich gravy. There was a four-day supply that Fleet said was fully nutritional for assault troops in the field, but without the psychogenics additive, it tasted like crap. Turk remembered.

Gauntlets off, getting as comfortable as possible in armor that, no matter how the technowhizzes improved it, still didn't bend in quite the same ways as the human body. Turk slipped his Volkhov off the snap-rings that held it on its supporting harness. The polymer ceramic stock was cold to his hands. He field-stripped it, checking to see that the nozzle was clear and the sealed propulsion pack was firmly seated. He touched it as he would a lover, caressing the smooth flare of the butt that fit into the custom-designed recess in his armor, running his fingertips over its skin, feeling for pits or cracks.

Carlos hunkered down beside him. "Never seen one of those old-fashioned Spitters before. Heard about them, though. Can I see it?" Carlos's four standard-issue lasers were slung across his back, rattling a bit because he hadn't snugged up their snap-rings.

Silently, Turk handed him the Volkhov.

Carlos turned it over, sighted along its barrel, fumbling for the trigger node. "Heavy sucker," he said.

Turk nodded.

"Thought you Scorpions were hot shit, latest equipment and all that. How come you use this dinosaur?"

Delta groaned. "Now you done it, shagger."

Turk ignored her. He took the Volkhov back and eased the a-pac into its chamber, then powered the weapon up to ready. "I don't use disposables. They don't have the killing power, they don't have near the accuracy or the reliability. With a laser burst, you've got to pinpoint your target. With the Splitter, you get a one-meter-wide splatter of acid-magnesium pellets that's going to take down anything in the immediate area. With four lasers, you're carrying more weight and bulk than I am with this and five thousand rounds in a-pacs. And a trail of disposables will lead the enemy right to you."

Carlos held up his hands. "Jesus Maria, all right."

Delta chuckled. "Don't never talk to Turk about disposables, shagger."

Even inside the armor, Turk could see Carlos stiffen.

"My name is Carlos."

Delta shrugged. "Maybe. But until you live through your first drop, you're a shagger."

Carlos's voice went hard. "I been with a First-In Division for six years. I got three medals and I been wounded twice. Maybe this is my first drop and maybe I ain't earned any implants yet, but I ain't no frickin' neophyte."

"Yeah, and me and Turk have been through eight shaggers on eight drops. All of 'em First-In shock troops that thought they were purely fissionable material. I don't care how many medals you got, you ain't a Scorpion yet."

Carlos tapped the flash on the shoulder of his armor. It showed a black scorpion, tail raised to strike, on a red field circled by ancient latinate letters in silver paint reading *animus opibusque parati*. "This says I am. And I want to know right now if I'm part of this team, or not?"

Delta's voice went about the same temperature as liquid nitrogen. "As long as you obey orders, you're part of the team. If you're still around at the end of this mission, then you're a Scorpion."

Carlos had the sense to shut up.

Delta sat down beside them, her armor hydraulics hissing in the night air. Feeling around in her belt pouch, she pulled out an infochip and slotted it into her helmet. She leaned back on her arms.

Turk didn't have to see her smile to know she wasn't studying her Tac manual. Turk had once listened to some of her music. It gave him a lightning-shot headache. His own tastes were classical, blues with old instruments like clarinets and saxophones and piano and string bass. Remembering their first sight of Carlos in regulation haircut and crisp linens, Turk grinned. The shagger probably listened to Fleet-approved adventure stories where the young recruit always saved the division and became a hero. With medals.

Except that it never happened that way. Eight dead shaggers, heroic or not, proved that.

Three hours before midnight local, Delta checked her sat-scan uplink. After a few seconds, she shook her head. "Crazy."

Turk's head tilted in a silent question.

"No traffic. Just a lot of live-air static. I pick up our spysat code, but nothing originating on planet. Like all the com operators just walked off and left their links open. Nothing from our sector at all."

"Malfunction?"

Delta tapped the unit with her fingertips. "No, it's nominal. There's just nothing out there."

"Which goes along with the flatline on local power use."

Turk turned his head, scanning the green-washed trees around them, getting crawly again. "This don't feel so good, Dee."

"AOP, Turk." She snapped open the transdermal unit that laid along the armor on the inside of her left thigh. "Dial yourself three hours narcosom. Carlos will take first watch, you're second. I'll take the last one. If the owner of that place shows up, I don't want anyone fugged out on sleep drugs, so don't forget to set your override stim."

Turk grinned. "Do I ever?" The warning was for Carlos. Delta could be delicate when she wanted to bother.

Delta laid her weapon, a new-model flame pulser, within easy reach and curled around Turk's back. In armor, there was no chance of flesh touching, but the weight of her arm over his hip was familiar. Carlos's low murmur came over the circuit. "That don't hardly seem fair. Who do I sleep with?"

Delta raised her head. "Your manual, shagger."

Turk snapped awake, his heart pounding, ears ringing with the jolt of override stim that Delta's remote command dumped into his body from his suit dispenser. He grabbed the Volkhov and slithered into the trees, homing on Delta's body heat. There was another heat smudge moving within the hundred-meter range of his scanner. Delta was crouched behind a low-branched evergreen. Turk dropped beside her. In a few seconds Carlos joined them, silent and alert. Turk couldn't see any movement in the gray predawn light.

"About twelve minutes ago a woman came down that track on the far side of the clearing. She went into the cabin then came out and went to the barn. She's alone and I didn't see any sign of weapons. Carlos, circle right around the clearing and plant yourself next to that track. You see any movement, you let me know. Turk, take the barn. Let's keep this quiet. Seal up and go."

Turk banged his head inside his helmet to depress the rocker that sealed his suit from the outside air. He squeezed Delta's shoulder, then moved off through the trees, keeping low, all sensor systems online as he rounded the split-rail enclosure in back of the barn.

Several short-horned, bulky reddish beasts lay or stood quietly in the muddy lot, their jaws moving in unison as they chewed, their large brown eyes regarding him calmly. Turk eased through the fence and skirted around the animals, keeping one eye on them and the other on a small door standing ajar in the back wall of the barn. He went flat against the wall beside the door, audio gain on full, listening for noise from inside the building. His scanner showed the woman about six meters from the door, unmoving.

Turk snugged up the Volkhov and slid around the edge of the door. The woman stood in the golden light of a flame-curled lantern, a bucket in one hand, the other hand curled around her chin. A frown creased her forehead. She must have seen Turk's silhouette against the open door. She turned, looked at Turk, shifted her eyes to the Volkhov. She went absolutely still and dropped the bucket. A pale liquid spilled across the straw flooring.

Turk tongued his com speaker and motioned with the flared nozzle of the Volkhov. "Hands behind your head. Turn around. Now."

She did as she was told. Turk grabbed a leather-braided rope from a peg on the wall, whipped its length around her wrists, then made a loop around her neck and tied it off. There was resistance in her body when he touched her. He pushed her ahead of him toward the barn's main door. "Scorp 9, I'm coming out with prisoner."

Outside the barn, a thin lemon light showed the woman to be only a couple of centimeters shorter than Turk. Brown hair lightly streaked with gray fell down her back in a long braid. Her shoulders were wide, her bare forearms lined with hard muscle. Deep brown eyes watched him, tense and wary, but not panicked. Her mouth was a firm slash across her set jaws. Even with her wrists tied to the back of her neck, she stood balanced, knees loose and weight forward on her feet.

She was dressed in brown leather pants and soft hide boots, topped with a loose shirt woven of some dull red natural fiber. The belt that snugged her waist carried a knife. The matte carbo hilt marked it as a Scorpion T-blade. Turk's lips pursed in a soundless whistle. He slid the knife from its sheath, stepping back as he felt her body tighten.

Leaving tracks across dew-wet grass, Delta came up, circling to stand quartered behind their prisoner. "What have you got?"

Turk cut his speaker. "A problem, Dee." He handed Delta the T-blade. "She was carrying this, and she recognized my Volkhov right off. She understands *lingue*."

The woman's eyes flicked from one blanked face shield to the other, as if she could hear them talking.

Carlos slid into backup position. "Look at her face," he said.

A lighter patch marred the tanned skin of her right cheek, a pale network of faint scars that looked like an acid burn.

The woman's head tilted to the side. She frowned, eyes squinched. She looked up, her gaze traversing the three of them. "You're . . . Scorpions," she said slowly.

Suddenly Turk knew what had caused the scar on her face. He went to speaker. "So are you."

Her laugh had a scornful edge. "Not any more."

Delta ignored the denial. "When were you inserted? How did you get here? What's your mission?"

"Mission?" The laugh came again. "Tac-Com still isn't telling you anything, are they? My mission was the same as yours."

Carlos swore. "I thought we were the first Assault Team in."

"Shut up," Delta said.

"First? You're just another bunch of dumbshits." The woman eased her shoulders against the strain of arms tied behind her neck. "Told you that Fleet is going to land ground troops as soon as the Assault Teams clear their objectives, didn't they? That's what they told us, too. Then they flew away. Left us here. The same as they're going to do when you fail."

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"You won't make it. None of us did. You'll end up marooned, just like the rest of us. If you're lucky, you'll find out that you like life here. If not, you'll probably get yourselves killed. That's easy enough. This planet has a lot of ways of making you take yourself out."

Carlos prodded the woman with the muzzle of his laser. "I can sure as shit take you out right now, *chinga*. You better get straight with us."

She turned her flat stare on Carlos. "You're the shag-

ger on this team, right? Take a word of advice. Watch your ass."

Turk switched to internal. "Is this making sense to you, Delta?"

"No, but it's going to." Delta spun her weapon over her shoulder, guiding it into the clips that held it firmly to the back of her suit. Grabbing the woman's bent elbow, Delta swung her around so they were face to face. "If you're a Scorpion, you know how we operate. All this crap you're laying on us means nothing. Why did you mission fail?"

"You'll find out soon enough."

"Now."

"Not from me. I don't owe you anything. I'm not a Scorpion any more."

"Once a Scorpion, always a Scorpion. There's only one way to resign from the Service, you know that. It can be easy, it can be hard, your choice. But you're going to tell us what we need to know before you check out."

They'd played good Scorpion-bad Scorpion before. Turk flipped up his face shield and slipped into his part. "We don't have to kill her, Com. We can just incapacitate her for the duration. She was one of us once." He grinned. "Call it professional courtesy, Com."

Delta was silent for a moment, then said, "You want to give us a little cooperation, I might agree to that."

"Tarkshit. I've played that game myself. Kill me or don't. Either way, you get nothing from me. Doesn't matter anyway. In a few hours you won't care."

Delta flipped the lock-seal and swept her helmet off. Short red hair, lank with sweat, bounced around her cheekbones. Her smile showed chromium metal eyeteeth filed to sharp points. On her right cheek, the stylized Service scorpion tattoo was embellished by a curlicued design of blue lines that crawled out to curve around her chin, flaring over her nose and forehead, resolving into a rampant scorpion on the other cheek. The clear glass optic implants under her straight brows reflected the brown-haired woman's face in obverse. "Nothing? I beg to differ, ex-Scorpion. The Service taught you to resist interrogation. But your intelligence is out of date, sweetie. Most anybody could stand interrogation when all they had to deal with was nothing more than a beating or a chemical injection of some anticholinergic compound."

Turk felt the woman stiffen as Delta let her toothy smile die.

She said, "Service decided to add a refinement: the fear of overwhelming pain that can be repeated as often as necessary. They decided that being humane to prisoners wasn't effective, or even necessary. You know the Service. Expediency wins every time." She reached to touch the woman's scarred cheek. "I have a new implant—you remember implants. It's real simple. A small potentiometer hard-wired into my central nervous system. Just enough power to overlay my electromagnetic pulses on yours. You need to imagine how it feels to have your entire CNS out of synch before you decide to play hero."

The woman shrugged. "Do what you're going to do." The bravado didn't quite mask the sudden fear in her eyes.

"Hold her," Delta said.

Turk and Carlos crowded in on the woman. They leglocked her and pulled her elbows back. Turk braced the back of her head. Carlos held her chin.

Delta took her time stripping off her gauntlets. She held both hands before the woman's face. The rising sun glinted off the fine grid of metal wire in Delta's palms. "Last chance."

Turk could see the woman's Scorpion training take over. She didn't plead, didn't protest, didn't even curse them; didn't say anything because saying anything would inevitably lead to saying something.

Delta set her palms to the woman's temples and squeezed. The woman's body spasmed as Delta's potentiometer circuit shot current into her nervous system. The woman was in good shape; Turk and Carlos struggled to hold her as she writhed in the grip of conflicting neural impulses. When Delta released her, she sagged between them, muscles flaccid with shock.

Delta got right in the woman's face. "Where's local militia HQ? How many troops can you muster? Where's your comnet? Save yourself this pain. Give me some answers."

The woman was silent. Delta jolted her again and repeated the questions. Eyes glazed, she still resisted. "Damn it," Delta said, "talk to me."

It went on long enough that Turk was feeling sick before she finally broke. She wasn't real coherent by that time, mostly just lying on the ground twitching, her mouth gasping for breath like that of a fish out of water. Her answers didn't make much sense. There was no local militia, no central authority, no spaceport, no official infrastructures.

Carlos said, "She's got to be lying. You can't run a world without some kind of chain of command."

Delta flicked one silver-wired palm at his face. "Fool. She isn't lying. Either she's real dumb or this place is real strange."

"Well, Dee, that would explain why we got no power scan," Turk said.

Carlos nudged the woman with his boot. "Want me to ash her?"

Turk waited for Delta's answer, his skin tight.

Delta's face was pale and sweat-slimed. She shook her head.

"Turk, what pharmacology you got?"

"Usual stuff. Sulfasyn, analgin, some methendorphins, slammers, comatrex—"

"That'll do it. A double dose of comatrex should keep her out long enough. Take care of it." Delta sealed her helmet and walked off to stand at the edge of the planted field.

As they carried the woman into the cabin, Carlos nodded at Delta's unmoving figure. "What's with her?"

"Shut up," Turk said. They maneuvered the woman's body around a table and some tight-lidded barrels, and laid her on a low bed made of leather slung between wooden posts. Turk opened the wrist panel of his suit, baring his skin. He clenched his fist—three short, two long. An injector port implant slid out of his wrist, and



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he smacked it against the woman's neck. As the comatreh flooded into her bloodstream, she went quiet, the shivering and spasming easing off.

"Jesus, that's slick," Carlos said.

Turk checked the woman's pulse. It was faint but steady. He tucked a blanket around her while Carlos roamed the cabin, poking into wooden cupboards and behind bright woven curtains.

"Look at this," Carlos said, holding up a bracelet of hammered brass set with a lump of rough amber. "I got me a souvenir."

Turk looked at him, then shrugged. "Asshole."

They broke camp and moved off down the track, the AC in their suits kicking in as the sun rose higher into the egg-blue sky. Delta put Carlos out in front and gave them all a small jolt of stimulant.

The track was about three meters wide, deeply rutted with long-seeded grass growing up the middle. On either side, the trees grew thick with overlapping branches that swept the ground and laid down a carpet of viridian needles. Young saplings showed where the road had once been wider. In low, muddy spots, half-round logs had been laid for traction. The track looped back and forth among the trees, turning on itself like a snake, so that Carlos was usually out of sight as he walked point.

Turk's heavy metal boots slipped in the mud as they trudged up an incline. "Shit. What kind of world is this? Tac-Com says it's been settled for a century. So where's some civilization? Did you get a good look at that place back there? Man, that was ancient history."

Delta's helmet bobbed. "Noticed it, Turk. No technology, no machines, no power use, no com-links. That woman didn't even have electricity, much less fusion."

Carlos's voice came through their helmet speakers. "Maybe this place was settled by religion freaks. Back to pre-Flight days or something."

"If so," Delta said, "Tac-Com didn't mention it."

Turk said, "I'm beginning to think Tac-Com didn't mention a lot of stuff."

"It's only about thirty kilometers to our primary. We'll find some answers there."

"We'd better. I don't like thinking there's something real important Tac-Com didn't bother to tell us."

"AOP, Turk, AOP."

Carlos snorted. "You keep saying that. What the hell does it mean?"

Delta laughed. "Did you ever look at that Scorpion patch you're wearing, shagger? It says *animus opibusque parati*. AOP. Ever think about what that means?"

"Means 'ready for anything.'"

"At HQ it means 'ready for anything.' Out here it means that things can get strange."

"Jesus Maria."

"You stay awake up there. I don't want any nasty surprises."

They slogged along in silence, Turk turning over some unanswered questions in his head. At local noon, they squeezed out some rations paste, but didn't stop. Wash-

ing down the last swallow with a drink of water that tasted like his armor, Turk said, "I never heard of any Assault Teams disappearing on this planet. Or any other planet, for that matter."

"Yeah?"

"She said Fleet never landed any ground troops."

"What are you getting at?"

"I don't know. But why didn't Tac-Com tell us there had been prior insertions?"

They covered another hundred meters of the twisting, rising road before Delta said, "Maybe Tac-Com don't know what happened to them."

"Or . . ."

"Or maybe Tac-Com *does* know what happened to them."

"You think we're bait?"

"Well," Delta answered, "if we are, selling your flesh and bone is what you get paid for. Four marks a kilo every week if you live to collect it."

Among the Scorpions, that joke was older than Turk. He didn't feel much like laughing at it right now. Something was nagging at him, something he couldn't quite remember. It chewed at the edges of his mind, never coming into focus. Frustrated, he tried to shrug it off. "Carlos has been up front for a long time. You want me to take over?"

Delta sounded surprised. "Shit, yes. I meant to send you up an hour ago. Forgot. Hey, Carlos?"

There was no answer.

"Carlos?"

The silence got louder.

"Seal up," Delta hissed. Her gauntleted thumb pointed Turk to the far side of the track. He slid into cover, his armor immediately turning the color of the dark, sundappled green of the trees. With all scanners on, the only blip that registered carried the signature of Scorpion armor. It was stationary, almost fifty meters ahead and about thirty degrees to Turk's right. He slipped away from the cleared stretch, cutting through the undergrowth while Delta followed the path.

The forest ended abruptly. A wide meadow scattered with chunks of granite left from glacial scouring stretched for over a kilometer before the trees took over again. A silty, ice-blue stream bordered with delicate purple flowers meandered its way across the meadow. Carlos was sitting on a boulder beside the stream, his elbows resting on his knees, gauntleted hands dangling. His helmet was off and his face was turned to the sun.

At the edge of the meadow Turk went down on one knee, every implanted, augmented, and artificial sense alert. According to his readouts, Carlos was the only living thing in range, except for Delta, whose heat blip also stopped at the treeline. Turk crouched silently, watching Carlos, watching for anything to register. Just before his thighs went numb with squatting, Delta's voice came soft in his ear. "Move in."

When Turk entered Carlos's peripheral vision, the shagger's head snapped around. He stood, his laser coming up to center on Turk. Turk froze, hands clear of his own weapon. Carlos's curly black hair was plastered to

his forehead with sweat, his mouth an angry white slash twisted across his brown face.

Up close, Turk couldn't help noticing how ugly the baffled muzzle of a laser really was. He kept his voice nice and soft. "Hey, Carlos, what's going on? You're supposed to be walking point, staying sharp."

Carlos's black eyes were as hard as the pebbles in the stream. "Been wondering, *hermano*, how come you lost your last eight shaggers."

Turk's own anger punched through his sudden fear. "Maybe because they did dumbass things like sitting down in the middle of a clear fire zone."

"Look at your scans. There's nothing out here but us." "If there is, they sure as hell know we're here. You want to discuss this someplace we got a little cover?" Carlos didn't answer. The laser stayed leveled at Turk's middle. Turk ran his tongue over dry lips. "Shit, man, why are you coming down on me? We're on the same side."

Delta's voice came soft in Turk's helmet com. "Hang on, Turk. I'll smooth him out."

The tranquilizer Delta's command remote ordered up through Carlos's suit dispenser hit his system fast. The shagger's eyes unfocused, his knees folded, and he lost his grip on the laser. He grinned. "Ah, fuck it. Doesn't matter."

Turk put a lid on his anger. As soon as he locked down Carlos's helmet, Delta's voice hissed online. "Turk, take him on across the clearing. I'll meet you on the other side. If he gives you any trouble, shoot him."

Carlos looked like a kicked puppy. "Jesus, what's wrong with her?"

"She's trying to get you through this mission alive." He shoved Carlos's laser back into the shagger's limp hands.

Carlos took the weapon like it was an alien artifact. "But there's nothing out here, Turk. Check your scans. So maybe I was a little out of line. Don't mean nothing. Hey, Delta," he called, his voice swooping up the scale, "let up, OK?"

Turk silenced his com and touched helmets with Carlos. "Listen, stupid, you mess around with Delta, she'll hit you so hard your whole family will fall over. You better get tight. You keep playing another track in your head, shagger, and your head is going to get splattered all over the landscape and I'll have to carry your gear." "Jesus Maria."

Following Carlos's amble across the exposed meadow, Turk felt like a target was painted between his shoulder blades. He crowded Carlos, but short of physically dragging the tranked shagger, all he could do was match the pace. Scanning no movement other than their own wasn't much comfort. The itch in Turk's mind was growing, too. Something wrong, an amorphous something that he couldn't quite put a name on, but something definitely getting strange.

Delta met them inside the treeline. Her anger simmered like heat waves off her armor. She grabbed Carlos's armored shoulder. "I don't know what game you're playing, dimwad, but if you ever target Turk again, I'll shoot you myself."

Carlos had left his face shield transparent. He jerked free of Delta's grip, his grin fading into a sullen scowl. He made no answer.

Delta reeled off a string of curses from some language that even Turk didn't recognize. "We're wasting time. Turk, get on up ahead. I want this slipstream shit where I can keep an eye on him."

The rough edge to her voice unsettled Turk. Delta was the ice trooper, never panicked even when death was flying thick around them. In the years they had fought together and loved together, Turk had never heard her as close to losing control as she was at this moment. His armored hand brushed her blanked shield. "I'm tight, Com." He moved out.

But he wasn't tight, and it took him a couple of hours to realize it. His adrenalin edge was gone. Instead of scanning for danger, Turk found himself admiring the tinypetaled white flowers that grew along the edges of the track, enjoying the sharp tang of the unfiltered air entering his suit, feeling relaxed and easy, letting his attention be diverted by red-backed birds that swooped overhead, snagging insects that drifted with the air currents on iridescent wings. He made a few hundred meters more before it occurred to him that maybe he wasn't doing his job. That maybe he was endangering the team. Several meters beyond that, he stopped and leaned his weapon against a downed tree lying half across the road, partially blocking another rutted track coming in from the left. "Hey, Com, anybody awake back there?"

Delta's voice was hard and terse. "Problem, Turk?"

"I'm going soft, Delta. Permission to dial up a couple of slammers?"

There was a long silence. Finally Delta said, "Denied. Hang on for a bit. We should be within five kays of the town. I don't want you coming down just when we hit our objective. Can you comply?"

Turk found himself grinning. "Compliance assured, Com. Anything you say."

"Turk, are you all right? Don't you fall apart on me, too, babe."

In the background through Delta's local speaker, Turk could hear Carlos mumbling what sounded like a continual stream of curses in Spanish. It sobered him. "I'm OK, Delta. Just a little untracked at the moment. I'll get it together."

It wasn't easy. This landscape just didn't feel dangerous. He puzzled it as he walked, the nagging itch back in his mind. They were in enemy territory, cut off from help or rescue, on their own to live or die. So why wasn't he worried?

He made another ten meters before he remembered his weapon still leaning against the log. Then it came together, the itch surfacing with a flash of fear that pumped in a jolt of the adrenaline he had been missing. "Shit."

Jogging back to the tree, retrieving his Spitter, he said, "Com, I finally tweaked what's been bothering me. We've been on this road for, what, eight or nine hours? How many side paths have we passed? I don't remember, but it's been several. I'm at another one now. So the ques-

tion is, where's the traffic? I haven't seen diddly squat in the way of human or vehicle tracks. Yet this is supposed to be the main road into town."

Other than the echo of Carlos's voice now warbling "*chile verde me pediste, chile verde te dare*" off-key, Delta's speaker was silent.

"Delta?"

"Yeah, Turk, hang on. I'm trying to check sat-scan. Having trouble pulling it up. Maybe we're not seeing anything because nothing's moving, at least nothing that requires power."

"So maybe they ride those animals back at the woman's place."

"I think those were food animals, Turk. Anyway, they'd leave tracks, too, and I'm check you: no prints of any kind. Wait one while I check local precip patterns. Maybe rain washed out everything."

Treeshadow crept over the road while Turk waited. Now that he'd identified the problem, its urgency faded. The sky took on a rose-gold tinge as the sun sagged down toward the far hills visible through the cut the track made in the forest. A thin smear of cloud laid a strip of lavender across the sky. Turk half-sat on the downed tree and wondered how long it had been since he had watched a sunset.

He was still sitting when Delta and Carlos caught up. Delta was punching in their sat-scan code, listening, punching it in again, repeating the motions over and over. Carlos looked like a kid playing wargames, raising his laser to firing position, squinting along the sights, swinging from side to side, muttering "Zzzap! Pzzzz! *iMuerto, cbingo!*"

"Delta?"

She glanced up at Turk, then back to the code keys lying along her forearm armor. "Can't remember the damn code."

The sun touched the horizon. Turk put his hand on her arm, stilling the restless motion of her fingers on the keys. "Not matter, Com, nothing's moving, including us. We're losing it, Delta. I don't know what's wrong, but none of us are nominal. Authorize a stim, please."

She stared at him, took a deep breath, released it. "Yeah, all right. Three hundred mikes, injecting now."

The methamphetamine flooded into Turk's system, electrifying his nerves and muscles with energy, bringing his brain back on line, sharpening up the edge. His heart slammed against his ribcage a couple of times, then settled down to a steady, elevated rhythm.

"Holy shit," Carlos said.

Delta was standing straight again, tension back in the lines of her armorclad body. "OK, so something's getting to us. I don't know how or what, but it's there. Turk, double-check me. Stay together. We start getting soft again, you sing out loud and clear." She surveyed the gathering dusk. "Move out. We got a job to do and we're running out of time."

It was full dark by the time the trees thinned out and they saw the lights of the town. Turk scanned for movement sensors or perimeter security, but nothing came

back at him. It was roughly eight hundred meters from the treeline to the first buildings. Even with their armor gone matte black, that was a lot of open space.

Delta held them still, traversing the field with the telescoping infrared function of her implanted eyes. The range was a bit too far for their suit scans.

"Anything?" Turk asked.

"Nothing registers. Have to be a direct recon."

Turk stood and checked the ready light on his Volkhov. "OK."

"No," Delta said. "Carlos, take it. Slide around that nearest group of outbuildings, let me know what's moving." She clapped him on the back. "Be careful."

Carlos ducked away from her. "Piss on that," he snarled. "Why do I always have to be the one to deposit the shit on the blower?"

"Because you haven't earned the right *not* to be," Delta snapped back. "Go on, shag out."

For a second, Turk thought Carlos was going to refuse. He moved a step away from Delta, splitting the target if Carlos went over the edge.

Delta brought up her weapon. "You refusing a direct order?"

Carlos's laser whined with power, but he backed off. In sullen silence he turned and faded into the dark.

Turk went to local speaker. "You're sounding a little tense, Dee."

Delta ripped her face shield up. The paired scorpions writhed as muscles jumped along her jawline. "I'm forgetting things, Turk. Important things. Carlos is totally out of line, and you're not exactly on peak, either. Yeah, I'm a little tense."

Turk touched her cheek with metal fingertips. "So now we know, we can be on guard." But it felt real strange to be reassuring the ice trooper. "Carlos wanted to know why we've been losing so many shaggers."

"Huh. Maybe because they're all dumbshits who get themselves killed."

Or maybe, Turk thought, because we'd rather lose a shagger than each other. He said, "Whatever. But keep an eye on him. He's gone twitchy on us."

Tac-Com said the town had about two thousand indigenes. If so, they were keeping a real low profile. The squat, one-story buildings showed few lights, no movement, no noise, and still no high-tech power use. Constructed of natural materials, the buildings clustered together, no obvious pattern to the streets that wound among them. Turk crouched beside Delta, letting his eyes wander over the visible structures, seeing nothing that looked like an administrative center or arsenal or tactical target of any kind.

Carlos's speaker crackled into life. "Com, Scorp 9: area clear. All the locals are bunched up at the other end of town. Some kind of celebration going on. I don't know what, but I got us a prisoner."

Delta stood. "What's your position?"

"I'm by a two-story building close to the middle of town. Found this silly fucker asleep in a doorway." He chuckled. "And I'm going to have me some fun. Get me some answers."

"Damn it," Delta muttered. "Carlos, hold your position. Take no action. We'll be on you in five."

They jogged across the open space, no leapfrogging, no cover, running side by side, which somehow felt wrong to Turk but he followed Delta's lead. In the shelter of the buildings, they slowed, scans on full.

The buildings, rough-walled with timber or rock, had no coverings on the windows. They looked inside the first couple that showed light, seeing interiors much like the ex-Scorpion's cabin: wooden furniture, heating stoves made of cast iron or ceramics painted with blue or red in scrolling patterns, brightly dyed cloths on tables set with wooden utensils, the soft flickering light coming from lamps burning some kind of sweet oil.

Delta had left her helmet shield up. In the warm glow of lamplight, Turk was struck by the beauty of her hard-lined face. He flipped off one gauntlet, leaving it dangling from his wrist coupling, and ran his fingers down the old burn scar that twisted from her missing ear down around the point of her jaw. He leaned to her, awkwardly fitting his arms around the bulk of her battle armor, weapons and field pack.

Delta laughed gently as his face shield butted the rim of her helmet. "Won't work that way, Turk." She reached up to unseal their helmets and dropped them on the ground.

Her mouth was dry and tasted of the chemical tang of slammer. Turk didn't care. They stood wrapped around each other, their silhouettes melded into one in the lamplight.

An ear-splitting whistle sounded from their helmet coms. Carlos's voice came tiny and stereophonic from the helmets lying in the dusty street. "I ain't waiting much longer. Where are you *chingos*?"

Delta jerked away from Turk's embrace. "Oh, shit, Turk. What are we doing? This isn't R&R. We're supposed to be on a mission."

Turk shook his head, feeling like his brain was rattling loose in his skull. "Yeah." He grinned. "If you say so, Com."

Delta looked around, the lamplight picking up one scorpion tattoo, then the other, as her head turned. "I guess we better find Carlos."

As they walked into the center of the town, bare hands linked, faint strains of music floated to them on the warm night air. Over the music came bursts of laughter and human voices cheering. A couple of small furred animals ran from them with feline smoothness into the darkness of shadowed alleyways. A dog barked, startling them, but it was confined behind a wooden-staked fence. Every few minutes, Delta called for Carlos. On the fourth try, he answered. "Over here, Com."

He was squatting, his laser balanced on his knees, flipping pebbles at a man slumped inside an open doorway. The man was giggling as he tried to dodge the small missiles. Carlos's teeth were bared, but it wasn't a smile. "It's about time you got here," he snarled.

"Ah, stay loose," Turk muttered.

In the light from the open doorway, the prisoner looked to be a small man dressed in an embroidered

blue shirt and loose trousers of dark leather. His light hair was caught back into a long tail. Silver and brass bracelets encircled both wrists. He grinned at them. "More strangers. Welcome. Are you here for the ten-day fair?"

It was Com's place to interrogate prisoners, but Delta said nothing. Carlos flipped another pebble. It caught the man on his forehead and he winced. "That hurt," he said.

Carlos grunted. "Oh, yeah? Try this." He dropped forward on his knees and backhanded the man across the mouth.

Tears filled the man's eyes. His face puckered. "You had no call to do that."

"Then you better give us some answers," Carlos said.

"But you haven't asked me any questions."

"Ah, *estupido*."

Carlos's arm came up again but Turk stopped the swing. "That's enough, shagger," he said.

Carlos's dark eyes glinted, his face gone cold and dangerous in the light from the doorway. His helmet lay in the dirt with his laser. His fists were doubled into hard metal knots. "Don't call me shagger."

Turk raised both hands. "All right, all right. Just go easy. Delta?"

Her face was twisted into a frown. "Yeah, uh . . . who's in charge around here?"

The man grinned happily. "You are."

Delta shook her head. "No, I mean, who's in charge of the town?"

"Nobody. It's ten-day fair."

"Where's your admin center, where's your com-links?"

"Com-links? Well, I guess Sandol has one. But he can't work it now. It'll work again in a couple of days, probably."

Delta's shoulders hunched. "Turk?"

Caught between Delta's indecision and Carlos's edgy anger, Turk tried to stifle his awareness of how quiet and peaceful the night was, how the strands of half-heard music drew him, how the smell of Delta's body stirred his senses. There were questions that needed to be answered, a mission that needed accomplishing. He just couldn't feel any urgency about it. He finally said, "Where's your town guard headquartered?"

"Town guard?" The man shifted position, starting to rise, then settled back as Carlos leaned in at him. "I think Sandol has a gun."

"Where do we find this Sandol?"

"At the fair, of course."

Carlos picked up his weapon. "This ain't getting anywhere."

Turk ignored him. "Where does this Sandol live?"

The man rubbed his chin with one thumb. "I don't know."

Carlos jammed the laser's muzzle against the man's chest.

"You got about two seconds to figure it out."

The man pushed the weapon aside. "I can't tell you." He grinned again, a silly, loose-lipped grin. "I could have told you a couple of days ago, or maybe tomorrow, but not now."

"What the hell does that mean?" Carlos rose to his feet, a swift uncoiling of tight muscles.

"Well, I can't exactly *explain* it to you. I'm not smart enough today."

"Ah, fuck it," Carlos said. His laser stuttered, stitching a neat line of black holes across the man's chest. The man collapsed sideways, the grin frozen on his face.

Turk grabbed the laser, jerking it from Carlos's hands at the same time Delta swung her weight into a punch that ended in the flexarmor over Carlos's belly. Carlos went down, hitting the ground hard, breath gone. Turk tossed Carlos's weapon aside, slid his Volkhov around so that the nozzle centered on Carlos's head. "Asshole. You didn't need to kill him."

Carlos's mouth gaped as he gasped for air. "Fucker was playing with us." He struggled to sit up, his eyes on the wide flare of the Volkhov's nozzle. "Needed ashing. So do you, you liverless *chingsos*."

Turk's finger tightened on the Spitter's firing stud. Only the visual memory of what the weapon did to a human body at close range held him still. "Delta?"

Her face was a blank. "I—I don't know, Turk. Just, I don't know. Do what you want."

If there was anything in the Scorpion manual to cover this kind of situation, Turk couldn't remember what it was. He just knew that no matter how much Carlos might need killing, he didn't want to do it. Things were jumbled in his head. Nothing made much sense. He backed off a step, keeping Carlos under the Volkhov's nozzle. "Take off your armor."

"Why?"

"Just do it!"

Carlos obeyed, resistance in every movement. When the shagger was down to his black silk bodysuit, Turk kicked Carlos's laser onto the pile. He glanced at Delta. "Slag it."

Carlos cursed them with a steady, acid bitterness as Delta's weapon sizzled, throwing their shadows into stark relief against the walls of the nearby houses, tainting the air with the reek of melting metal and polyplastics.

Turk motioned with the Volkhov. "Now take off. If I see your face again, I'll smear it all over the landscape."

"You miserable *chingo*! Sack of deadmeat dogshit! I'll get you!" He looked ready to take them on emptyhanded, mad enough to explode.

"Disappear, asshole."

As they watched Carlos back off into the dark, his presence remaining in the fading sound of a sibilant string of Spanish swearing, Delta said, "Was that a good idea?"

Turk shrugged. "What harm can he do with no weapons or no implants?"

"I guess you're right. What are we going to do with the local he asked? We can't just leave the body. It's not decent."

Turk stuck his head inside the open doorway. "In here," he said. They carried the man into the house, laying him on a low, pillowed couch, straightening his legs and folding his arms over his chest. Delta shook her head. "He still looks dead."

"Not much we can do about that." Turk looked closer

at the dead man's face. It wore the same acid peel on one cheekbone they had seen on the ex-Scorpion woman. "Delta?"

"Yeah, I see." The stretching of her mouth was too weak to be called a grin. "Now what?"

Turk twisted his shoulders, trying to ease the weight of his battle armor. "I don't know, Dee. Look around, I guess. If everybody's at this 'ten-day fair,' maybe we should check it out."

They moved off toward the strains of music, weapons slung, ambling down the middle of the streets that curved around houses and plots of open ground lined with flowers and food plants in neat rows. Delta put her arm around Turk's waist. "Looks like a nice little town."

Turk took a deep breath, enjoying the unknown flow-er scent that swam through his head with sensual pleasure. "Seems a shame to blow it up."

The celebration wasn't hard to locate. A large bonfire threw sparks swirling upward into the dark sky. Ringing it were several circles of people dressed in bright clothing hung with sashes and scarves ending in tiny bells that chimed in time to a clapping, swaying dance. Some large carcass turned slowly on a spit over a pit of smoldering coals, sending steam into the air and making Turk's mouth water. Long wooden tables held an array of bottles, jugs, and platters of red and yellow and green natural vegetables.

Hidden by the deep shadow cast by a large tree butted against the corner of a barn, Turk and Delta watched in unnoted silence. The dancers' faces were flushed with exertion, happy and laughing, childlike in their open enjoyment of the music and food and camaraderie.

Turk rested his chin on the top of Delta's sweaty head. "Looks like fun," he said.

Delta pulled away and turned her face up. Her lips curved in a wistful smile. "You know, Turk, I haven't danced in so long I don't think I remember how."

Turk grinned. "Shit, Dee, let's do it." He took her hand and tugged at it.

Delta laughed. "Can't dance in battle armor, Turk." She slipped through the unbarred door of the barn, pulling Turk after her.

They stripped down to their bodysuits, leaving their armor, weapons, and packs of explosives and field gear in a clanking heap. It took a while. The feel of Delta's unarmored body under Turk's hands, the smooth slide of muscle and the warm surge of blood under her skin, slowed the process. They got tangled up in each other, the dirt and sticky sweat of days in armor meaning nothing in the delight of flesh on flesh.

They never did join the dancers. The barn was warm with the body heat of animals that watched them with incurious eyes. One stall was bedded in clean, dry grass. And Delta proved again that her hard-wired CNS potenti-ator, activated delicately, had a couple of uses not noted in the manual.

They were asleep, curled around each other like puppies, when they were discovered sometime after dawn.

Turk came awake to find himself looking up at the

dark eight-centimeter flare of his Volkhov's nozzle centered between his eyes. Beside him, Delta was already awake, her naked body stiff with alarm.

"We found the other two," someone shouted.

The man holding the Volkhov was square-faced, the set line of his mouth and the sureness of his hands on the weapon leaving no doubt in Turk's mind that he knew the Spitter and how to use it. His right cheek bore the faded imprint of a Scorpion tattoo. Backing him up, Delta's weapon cradled in her arms, was the lanky farm woman they had interrogated.

Turk's skin went into goosebumps that had nothing to do with the cool of the morning.

♫ The man with the Volkhov jerked his thumb toward the barn's door. "Out."

"Let them have their clothes, Sandol," the woman said.

As they slipped into their black silk bodysuits, Delta managed a grim-edged smile. Turk caught it and threw it back, sharing her strength as he shared her fear.

Dressed, they were herded squinting into the bright sunlight. A crowd of townspeople had gathered in front of the barn. No trace of last night's gaiety showed on their faces. But every one of those faces bore either a Scorpion tattoo or the scars of its removal.

"Oh, shit, Turk."

Carlos's naked body lay on the ground, his belly ripped open from the impact of some projectile weapon.

Turk's brain felt fuzzy, thoughts flashing through too quickly to grab, memories of the night punching at him with the shock of a sonic explosion, Tac-Com, Fleet landings, their mission somehow forgotten, a town full of Scorpions. All Turk could do was silently echo Delta's "Oh, shit."

Someone brought their gear out of the barn and piled it in a handcart beside Carlos's body. The woman nudged Carlos with her foot. "Looks like we got some more retirees," she said.

Delta squared her shoulders, tightened up. "So what are you going to do with us?"

Sandol jerked his chin at the ex-Scorpion woman. "That's up to Magda."

The woman's grin had no humor in it. "You owe me one. That little interrogation wasn't my idea of a good time."

Turk eased his body between Delta and the woman. "If you were a Scorpion, you know how we operate. Why the hell didn't you just answer our questions?"

"Why should I? You invade my farm, jerk me around. Why should I help you? Shit, you didn't even know the right questions to ask. You still don't."

"So," Sandol said, "what do you want to do?"

Magda was silent long enough for Turk's nerves to wind another notch tighter. He felt his muscles tense, ready to fight even if it was useless. Finally she said, "Ah, forget it. We've been there. We know what it's like. They owe me. If they survive, I'll collect."

Delta said, "You mean you're just going to let us walk?"

Sandol grounded the Volkhov. "If Magda doesn't want to claim retribution, yeah, you walk. Without your weapons you're no danger to us. We catalog your im-

plants and if you use them to injure anyone, you'll face trial like anyone else." He smiled mirthlessly. "You'll either join us or you'll end up dead eventually. On Lethe you need other people to survive."

Turk looked at what was left of Carlos. "You killed him."

"He killed one of us. Bragged about it when we caught him. As far as I know, you two haven't killed anyone. If you have, we'll find out."

A couple of men were rolling Carlos's body in a ragged blanket. Parts of the crowd were already beginning to drift off. Turk felt disconnected, unable to believe what was happening, what had happened in the two days since their landing. Reaching for the familiar solidity of Delta's hard hand, he said, "I don't understand any of this."

Sandol almost grinned. "How many shaggers have you lost?"

"What's that got to do with it?"

"Magda and I lost our last half-dozen shaggers. Seems like we got too tight with each other. So Tac-Com retired us."

Delta shook her head. "We came in on a mission."

"You sure about that? Did you ever see any ground troop transports? Did you ever actually see any of the Fleet other than the personnel hold you and maybe a couple other Scorpion teams were shipped in?"

"So what? You never see anything prior to drop. Tac-Com said—"

Magda snorted. "Tac-Com told you what you needed to hear so you wouldn't cause any problems. Face it—you bonded to each other. You've lost too many shaggers, so you're no longer any use to Fleet. You're paying more attention to keeping each other alive than you are to Fleet's objectives. Fleet has decided that you're no longer reliable, so you're grounded. Just like the rest of us. Retired for the good of the Service."

"What about Carlos?"

"Your shagger? Unless Fleet has changed its ways, he was a cypher. Maybe he pissed off some tightass officer, maybe something in his psych profile they didn't like. Who knows? He was expendable. A test to see if you were salvageable. And to see if any one of you could resist going dumb on Lethe."

"I don't believe any of this shit. If Fleet doesn't think we're reliable, why not just discharge us?"

"With your implants and conditioning, you're too dangerous to turn loose on a civilian population. Why do you think you've never met any ex-Scorpions?"

Turk felt a tremble in Delta's hand. Suddenly things were beginning to make sense, and he didn't like it much. He kept his voice steady. "So they dump us here. Out of the way. Neutralized. That's why everything's low-tech. So we can't get off the planet."

"Now you're getting it."

"That still doesn't explain what happened to us. Why we forgot our mission."

Sandol sounded like he'd been through this before.

"Because Lethe is a Geo-V planet."

Turk had never heard the term. "Geo-V?"

Delta had. "Two periods of intense geomagnetic activity alternating with a period of relative inactivity. A couple of centuries ago it was known that that pattern influenced psi ability. The theory was that Geo-V made cerebral channels more receptive."

Magda topped the jumbled pile of their battle armor with Delta's flamer and the Volkhov. "Exactly. On Lethe, Geo-V rules our lives, everything we do, only it has nothing to do with psi. It's a lot more basic than that. The periodicity is regular and predictable. For two out of every ten days, everybody forgets responsibility and all that shit that Fleet used to bend us into the shape they needed. We just sort of go dumb and happy. It's no problem if we plan ahead. Leave the animals out to pasture, water the crops, have a party."

Turk felt like someone had hit him on the head with a blunt, heavy instrument. "You mean this is going to happen to us again?"

"If it doesn't, that's the only way you'll get off planet. Fleet watches. If you don't succumb to Geo-V, they'll pull you out and take you apart to find out why. Too many Geo-V planets we can't colonize. You know Fleet: the most good for the least cost. You're an unreliable team. By sending you here, they test your bonding, they get rid of an unwanted shagger, they see if any of you can resist the Geo-V effect. If you fail their test, it's no loss to Fleet. In the meantime, you'd better get used to the fact that you're grounded, Scorp."

Turk felt Delta's body stiffen in rejection of the woman's words. He turned to Sandol. "You were a Scorpion. You were the elite, you had a purpose. How can you just give up all that?"

The man shrugged. "All what? Living on the edge? Dying before you're thirty? Dirt and blood and pain, and

at the end of it, a handful of marks that you spend trying to flush the ugliness out of your mind before being dumped back into it? I don't miss it. You won't either, after a while. Give it a chance. You may find out you're human under those tattoos."

A town full of ex-Scorpions, the loss of their effectiveness as an assault team, no response from spysat to Delta's request codes—fighting it, not wanting to believe, Turk couldn't deny the man's assurance.

Delta moved closer to Turk. "How will we live?" She believed, Turk could hear it in her voice.

"Find a job. Someone will give you work. You'll learn." Sandol smiled for real. "You don't have much choice." He took up the handles of the cart, balancing it on its nose wheel. "There's food left from last night's party. Eat and then look up me or Magda. We'll brief you on local protocols, find you a place to stay until you can start earning your keep."

Sandol trundled away with the cart, Magda balancing the load with one hand as she walked beside him.

The sun warmed the tops of their heads as Turk and Delta stood alone in front of the barn, feeling naked in their silk bodysuits, stripped of their armor. Other people moved in the street, casting covert glances, but basically ignoring them. A pack of children surveyed them from behind a fence, whispering and giggling. An orange cat strolled tail-high into the barn. A flock of white-feathered fowl scratched in the dust before the open doorway of a house, their rusty cackling overlaying the chinking of crockery.

Turk slid his arm around Delta's waist, latching on to her solidity. "Com, I think things just got real strange."

Delta shivered. "AOP, Turk, AOP. It looks like we just retired." ♦

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I Walked With Fidel

George Zebrowski

"Well, of course I don't have any plans for dying."

—Fidel Castro, *Playboy* interview, August 1985

He came right up to the front gate of the naval base at Guantanamo Bay and stood there in the bright sunlight, empty-handed, staring at us. He seemed harmless enough, so I opened the gate and went out to meet him.

"What do you want?" I asked.

The corner of his mouth twitched as if he were trying to say something.

"It's him, isn't it?" Kip shouted, coming out after me.

"Sure looks like Old Inconvertible himself," I said.

Kip walked around the tall, white-bearded figure in army fatigues. "What do you want?"

The old man mumbled something in Spanish.

"Did you get that?" I asked.



Illustration by Walter Velez

"I think he wants to come in," Kip said.
"I'll watch him. Get the sergeant."

I took a better grip on my automatic rifle and faced the Cuban leader, wondering what had happened to him. He seemed glassy-eyed and stiff, without expression. Things hadn't gone well with him after the Soviets cut him loose, leaving him with no cheap source of coal and oil. He had remained in power for a while because everyone was afraid of what might happen without him. The AIDS epidemic had destroyed tourism, and exports of sugar, nickel, and citrus fruits had declined substantially. Washington had simply let Fidel stew, then dealt with those who came to power after him, just as the Israelis had done with Arafat. The club of rivals just couldn't bear to grant each other anything, especially vindication. Revenge and punishment were real satisfactions for them, to be savored in this life, not some later one. I had always felt the same way.

The sergeant came out with Kip and laughed. "Well, well," he said, "what do we have here? Looks like the old boy himself. Come to collect the rent personally?"

"There's something wrong with him, Sarge," I said.

"Looks like a zombie. It's probably not him, but who cares? Take him somewhere and let him loose. And don't be long about it, Corporal!"

"Yes, Sarge," I said, watching the old man, who seemed afraid of us. I had only a few days left in my hitch, and was looking forward to going back to college in Miami, my home town. But as Kip brought out the jeep, I realized that if this was Castro, then he had delivered himself into the hands of someone who had the background to know what to do with him. College could wait.

I got him into the jeep and drove a few miles up the road, where I stopped and said, "My grandfather was with you in the hills when you started—and you locked him up for twenty years, you bastard."

The old man turned toward me, trembling; saliva glistened in his unkempt beard. His eyes seemed to register emotion, then dulled and remained fixed and bulging. The afternoon sun was hot, but I was the only one sweating as I demanded that he tell me why he had come to the gate.

Slowly, haltingly, he told me what had happened to him, how he had always taken good care of his health, until one day he was diagnosed with colon cancer that had erupted quickly and was too far gone for treatment. So he went to the last of his crackpot researchers and ordered them to save his life. They were the ones who had helped him try his crank genetic theories in costly breeding experiments for the improvement of cattle, and had produced climate-resistant stock that wasn't much good for milk or meat. One of these men had also developed a strain of giant strawberries that were mostly water. The only Nobel laureate Castro had lured to the island had left in disgust after these failures. The cranks who stayed studied folk medicines, convincing Castro that vast secrets remained to be uncovered, medicines that would startle the world and make Cuba free of her dependency on foreign coal and oil.

Fidel turned to these shamans to prolong his life, which they did, but their treatments had not given him the health and vigor he had wanted. By then he had already been retired from power, by a party congress intent on "democratization," and was living at a small country estate, where he hoped to survive his opponents, whom he saw as corrupted by the illusions of democratic rule that had swept the world in the '90s. As he saw it, the reformers had merely found a way to justify doing business with the United States, keeping themselves in power by serving neo-imperialist influences, and averting the American invasion of Cuba.

He told me of his plight in snatches, then begged me to take him to the United States to find medical help for his condition, which enabled him to live, but with hardly a life to speak of. When I told him I would try, he grasped my arm and seemed about to weep, but what came out was a terrible wheezing, as if all the moisture in his lungs had turned to jelly and he was trying to expel it.

I left him with a cousin for the few days remaining in my hitch, then called my brother Miguel, who owned a night club in Miami. Miguel made our travel arrangements, including getting "Fidel" a visa as an entertainer.

"Medical care is expensive," I told the old man. "You'll have to earn the money. Do you have any?" It occurred to me that if he had a large enough stash somewhere, I could grab it and leave him here.

"My money is all gone," he said softly, and I knew that that I wanted more than money.

Three weeks later, we opened the act with me saying, "Tonight, for the first time anywhere, Fidel Castro! Depositor of the hated Batista, once a Soviet puppet—and now a zombie!"

Fidel sat in a chair facing the audience, unable to move, and I wondered how many people would really believe he was Fidel Castro. Would anyone believe that he was a zombie? The visa people had laughed as they stamped his papers, because my brother had put down his true name and profession—Fidel Castro, Zombie. He had become stiffer after leaving Cuba, and required more vitamins and water to keep him going. He never slept. I forced him to take a shower every day, and dressed him in fresh army fatigues. It was no harder than when I took care of my ailing grandfather in his last days.

"The audience may ask questions," I announced.

"Is that all he's going to do?" a man shouted from the back.

Fidel's eyes stared at me as I turned to look at him. "Must I do this, Enrico?" he asked in a strained whisper. I had asked him to try smoking a cigar and blowing rings during the act, but he had been unable to draw any smoke.

"Señor Castro," an old man said from one of the front tables, "why did you muzzle a free press?"

Fidel seemed to become even stiffer. The corner of his mouth twitched as he struggled to answer. "What are you?" he asked in a broken voice. "The son of a doctor, lawyer, or shopkeeper? You fled Cuba because your

parents feared for their privileges and sought to subvert the revolution."

"Answer the question!" the man shouted.

"You ask," Fidel continued, "why I failed to help my enemies."

"Another question," I called out, sensing that the audience was warming up to the game. I could feel the old grievances, hatreds, and bigotries still simmering, and suddenly knew that the room would be packed for future shows.

People seemed to accept the old man as Castro. My grandfather would finally get some justice out of the sonofabitch. My father, a lawyer, wouldn't have cared much, since he had done well in Miami, and he had never liked my mother's father. He thought that as a "Fidelista," my grandfather had only gotten what he deserved.

"Fidel!" an old man cried out from the back of the room. "You held up such high ideals, and we expected so much from you. How could you have failed us?"

Fidel tried to rise from his chair, but fell back. "I never betrayed the Cuban people," he croaked loudly, as if a snake was whispering from his lungs. "Ordinary families had it better from the first day after I threw the American gangsters out of our country. What did it matter if a few of the privileged suffered?"

"But your own party removed you!" the old man objected. "Don't deny your own sins by comparing them to others."

"Yes," Fidel continued, "my party gave in to the greed that flowered with Reagan and spread to the Soviets. Real socialist ideals, they realized, would not make them rich. Now the common good will again have to struggle against personal fortunes that will be handed down the generations like a disease." He raised his hands as if in prayer. "Ah! Who could have imagined that the Soviets themselves would capitulate?"

"They got tired of paying out charity to you!" a young man at the front called out.

We gave two shows that first day, and every day for the rest of the month. In his off hours, Fidel sat in our hotel suite and watched baseball games. I sat with him, and once in a while, he would say softly, "I was once a good pitcher. I could have been a great one."

"Yes," I said, "and the owners would have exploited you." He had in fact been a notable right-hander in his teens and twenties, and the Giants had taken an interest in him. They might have signed him if he had not stopped playing the game.

I sipped my Cuba Libres, and began to feel sorry for the man who had become dictator believing he was serving the cause of justice, convinced that it was the only way to overcome human inertia, and history had made a fool of him. He had supported the failed Soviet coup of 1991.

After a moment he asked, "When will the doctor come to look at me? We must have enough money by now."

"Soon, Fidel, soon," I said.

* * *

The audiences at the club hurled terrifying questions at him, but he answered each one with great care.

"Why did you do these cruel things?" a young woman asked him.

"They were small evils. Generations of Cubans had lived in a whorehouse. The United States never cared about the dishonest, tyrannical regimes that robbed Cuba. It never cared about governments that killed thousands of people and stole vast sums of money. It never cared about Cuba's poverty, ignorance, unsanitary conditions, its lack of schools, hospitals, and medical services, or its unemployment and racial problems. It never cared. But as soon as a regime with ideals came into power, the United States cared—by strangling us with a blockade for thirty years."

"But how did putting political prisoners naked into a bare cell for years help Cuba?" she asked. "How could you do that?"

"It was only a few," Fidel replied, pleading with her. "I started in the hills with some of them, and they turned against me. If I had let them go, they would have worked against Cuba."

"No!" the woman cried. "Against you!"

I walked with Fidel every morning on the beach, to keep him from stiffening up completely. He seemed to enjoy the ocean, and often stopped to look toward Cuba, as if he could see it.

One morning he stood staring for a quarter of an hour, and I imagined that he was dreaming of the day he had pleaded with the Russians to nuke Washington to prevent the American invasion, or the afternoon he had been in the bunker with the Soviet officer as an American reconnaissance plane flew overhead, and to the horror of the officer had pressed the ground-to-air missile's launch button himself, bringing down the plane. What had he been hoping for in those days, when it seemed that his regime would be toppled? Had he nurtured visions of blasting North America with nuclear weapons, so that it could be settled one day by Cubans and Central Americans?

In later years, when relations with the declining Soviets had soured, a Russian restaurant had burned down in Havana, and had been replaced by a Chinese one. It had not helped. The symbolism of the change had not gotten him any more foreign aid.

Finally, the colon cancer metastasizing throughout his organs panicked him into accepting treatment from his crank doctors. They slowed his life functions, killing the cancer, but the sluggish pace of existence he got in return was full of pain, without will or pleasure. He would creep toward death for another fifty years, they had told him, becoming more and more grotesque in the process.

Still looking out across the water, he said, "They were small evils, weren't they? Why do people reproach me with them?"

I said, "Can you understand that evils must not be compared? All claims for a net good in human history are wrongheaded, even though relative good does come

about, sometimes even from revolutions. But it's this very kind of argument that must be forbidden. There's a little story that proves the point. Imagine a world where all good is accomplished—but the price is the imprisoning of a small child in a closet, where it is tormented to the edge of death but never allowed to die, while millions benefit. Pragmatists must accept the conclusion that the child's plight is worth the pain. Believers in the greatest good for the greatest number must insist that it's a bargain. Only one child! Worse situations have been embraced as better."

"One child?" Fidel asked. "If I had killed only one soul, I would have been considered a saint. Yes, that would have been great progress."

"No," I said. "Utilitarian progress is only an accountant's progress. In such a world there can only be islands where evil is ignored, not overcome. No other age can compare to the darkness that has spilled out of human beings, yet the twentieth century still cherishes the illusion of progress."

He turned and faced me. "But that's only a story," he said softly. "It proves nothing about the world."

"The world's example," I answered, "is the same story, but with less elegance in the point. To be practical is to do whatever serves your purpose, whatever your power allows, in fact to do whatever you like. I told you that you wouldn't understand."

"No," Fidel said. "It is you who does not understand. Practical progress is all we human beings can get. More is not possible. I was better than Batista and the American Mafia, even at my worst. And in this world I did all that was possible. Who had ever given Cuba more?"

"Then you stand convicted out of your own mouth."

A man called me on the phone one evening and said, "Do you know that the man in your show is Fidel himself and a genuine zombie?"

"What do you want?"

"You'll have trouble disposing of him. Maybe I can help. I'm a specialist."

"And you want to be paid for your services?" I assumed that the man knew the club had made a lot of money from the act.

"No—my advice is free."

"Can you tell me over the phone?"

"You'll have to burn him, then cut him in little pieces and bury him. It has to be in Cuba. Keep him the way he is, and he'll outlast all of us."

"Are you a doctor?"

"I am."

"Would you come by and check him for me?"

"No need—there's nothing to be done. He's as near to dead as our biological clocks can measure. Help him let go."

I hung up, shaken. Fidel was sitting in his chair, looking out to sea through the picture window as he often did. I stared at the back of his head. He might have been Moses, or King Lear, with all that hair. In his heart, I realized, he might be innocent—even of his own hypocrisy—because he had set himself to change what could

not be changed, deluding himself with the relative improvements he had made in Cuba, even though they disappointed him. It was because he had professed so much more that he had to be judged more harshly. Many insisted that he had never had any convictions—that power alone had been his aim. He had bet on the Soviets winning the Cold War and had lost. He had been lucky in having the United States to blame for his failures, or he would have been deposed in his first decade. The Soviets saved him by extracting a promise from Kennedy not to invade, in return for removing their nuclear missiles.

At seven the next morning, I took his arm and led him out to the beach, and walked at his side as always. After a few minutes, he spoke without looking at me, saying, "There will be no doctor, will there?"

It was time he knew the truth. "No one can help you."

"In that case, when you feel that you have made enough money from me for your grandfather's suffering, take me back to Cuba, Enrico." He stopped and looked at me with his sad, bulging eyes, and I knew that I could not refuse him. Besides, his audiences at the club had been getting smaller recently. Many of the older patrons had stopped coming. They had lost interest in confronting some crazed old impersonator who could not possibly be their old enemy.

"We'll finish out the week," I said.

That same evening, in the middle of Fidel's long, meticulous response to a question about corruption and drug-dealing in his regime, a young man stood up at a table in the back of the room, shouted "Death to tyrants!" and fired three shots into Fidel's chest. As the assassin turned and fled, Fidel simply sat back in his chair and stared into space.

I got a wheelchair from the wings and rolled it out to him. "Are you hurt?" I asked, ready to help him. There was still a part of me that doubted his condition, that expected him to be mortally wounded.

"No," he said, standing up. "At least this one was more direct."

"Direct?" I asked.

"More so than the CIA's exploding cigars."

I walked him back to his dressing room, sat him down, and opened his shirt to examine his wounds. There was no bleeding as I dug out the bullets from his rubbery chest. I had imagined that his heart rate and breathing were very slow, that he was only an old man with some peculiar condition, but the bullets convinced me of his true state. He could not bleed to death.

There was a loud knock on the door. I went to it and opened it a crack. A cop in plain clothes was waiting to be let in.

I said, "The shots missed, but he's shaken up and can't see anyone right now." The cop looked past me, getting a glimpse of Fidel, and seemed convinced.

I rented a recreational vehicle in Havana and drove it to a small coastal village north of the Sierra Maestra Mountains. My brother flew Fidel in a day later by amphibious aircraft, and I hid him in the RV.

"This is more than the old bastard deserves," my brother said before going back to the plane. "What is there here for him anyway?"

"I don't know, but whatever it is, he's going to have it."

"Why bother about him?" He had come because he liked to fly his plane, not for old politics, and because I had asked him. Old Fidel had made us a few dollars, but sooner or later, my brother and I both knew, we would have to get free of him.

The next morning Fidel and I drove into the hills where he had started his revolution and stopped in a small village, beyond which there was no road.

I looked around at the dusty village. "What will you do here?" I asked, wondering how long he could exist without nutrients of some kind.

"I will find out how long I can survive."

"What do you mean?"

"I must be able to die, sooner or later."

As I gazed at his rigid figure sitting next to me, I confronted my own love-hate relationship with revolutions, with changes of any kind, which rarely achieve their ends, because of failings deep within the human heart. Young revolutionaries, if they survive, live to sink into immobility and disappointment with their own kind. The time of just revolutions had ended before I was born.

"Drive up as high as possible," Fidel said, as if giving profound advice. "From there I'll go by myself." His raspy voice carried the authority of someone who knew where he was going.

I drove the RV up a winding dirt road, and came to a stop before a grove of trees. Rocky mountainside rose beyond it. Fidel struggled out of the vehicle and stood looking up at the heights. I got out and waited.

"Defeating Batista," he said, "was easier than governing Cuba. I had been clever enough to see the battles that I would need to win, but to rule Cuba profitably would have required the friendship of the United States, which I lost because I would not deal with the devil. I went to the devil Washington feared, who professed just ideas. But it's the devil you know that counts. I didn't know either devil well enough to benefit Cuba." He paused, as if overcome with emotion, but as usual his body stifled the show of human feeling, permitting him only words. "There are those," he continued, "who believe it best to leave things as they are and hope for gradual change, no matter how bad things get. Do you believe, Enrico, that force is never justified?"

"What will you do here?" I asked.

He turned and faced me. "You know what must be done, or I will rise again, and no one knows how long I will suffer. Destroy me."

"I can't do it!" I shouted, remembering the doctor's phone call.

"Do it for your grandfather, and for me."

"No, I won't. . . I can't," I muttered, appalled by my sudden weakness.

He turned away and started up toward the grove of trees. I waited until he was nearly out of sight; then curiosity got the better of me and I went in after him. He was staggering among the trees, toward the far side of the grove. I crept after him, realizing that I couldn't take him back with me. What would I do with him? There was a limit to how long an ex-dictator could be exhibited, even if I could have his condition as a zombie certified.

I had a vision of two demented scholars from an old horror movie examining Fidel.

"Zombie?" asked the first scholar of his colleague.

The other nodded smugly and said, "Zombie."

Fidel stumbled out of the grove and threw himself on the slope, lacerating his rubbery flesh on the sharp rocks, but his movements seemed unphysical. He was trying to crawl back into the hill of dreams, into the mocking mirage where every dear ideal cowers, into the hills where he had been a hero, to a wild high place beyond life, from which we take what we need, even though it doesn't actually exist. The blood pounding in my ears became a roaring fire in my brain as I watched him struggling to tear himself apart.

"Okay—come back and wait in the grove!" I shouted, retreating.

I looked back from the grove and saw his stiff figure stumbling down after me. Wind gusted through the trees, but died away as I hurried through to the RV and took out a spade, a can of gasoline, and the machete.

There are nights when I awaken on the rocky hillside and see his pillar of fire roaring in the green grove. Trapped in an insane animation of a socialist realist mural with Henri Rousseau's staring beasts, I cut up the charred body while Fidel's frozen eyes watch me, and bury the pieces all over the grove, insisting to myself that he did some good, some bad, and was a lousy administrator, and that I was probably giving him too much credit for selfishness. What could you expect from an outraged, handsome young man who modeled his speechmaking on Mussolini's? Maybe it wasn't his fault. Maybe pragmatism is all we can get. I split the head into four bloodless pieces and bury them far apart. Then I wake sweating between icy sheets. My pillows are stones as I turn over and tunnel back into sleep, and the fire ignites again in the blackness behind my eyes. ♦

Green Lawns

Bruce Holland Rogers



1

One thing about being up here is that I can see how green the lawns really are. Waxman's. Evans's. Taylor's. All clipped and manicured. All a rich, kelly green.

When I hear the sprinklers running, that's when it's hardest on me. What I wouldn't do, what I wouldn't change, if only they'd give me a chance, if only they'd let me down and give me a taste of that water. That's the hardest thing, of

Illustration by Tom Lunzer

course, the lack of water. You stop feeling the hunger pretty soon, because the thirst is so much bigger.

My throat feels like it's made of paper.

2

The first time Waxman mentioned the lawn to me, it seemed innocent enough. We were standing at his backyard barbecue, watching the burgers grill while his wife made a salad and Waxman's kids played on the jungle gym and swings. Waxman had a huge yard—two standard lots, he told me—and the biggest house on the block. The backyard play area was equipped like a small park.

"Well, Dick," he said, "I guess you're just about settled in enough to start giving some attention to that lawn of yours. It sure could use some water and a trim."

I had introduced myself deliberately as Richard. I hated any shortened version of my name. For the sake of amiability, though, I didn't bother to correct him, especially since, given the lush state of his lawn, he wasn't going to like what I had to say about my own lawn.

"To tell the truth," I told him, "I'm planning on just letting the lawn go."

"Let it go?" Waxman looked up from flipping the burgers. He smiled an uncertain smile like he knew I was joking, but he didn't get the joke. "What do you mean, let it go?"

"I mean just that. Not cut it. Let it grow as tall and ragged as it wants to in the spring, and then when the summer heat comes, cut it once and let it turn brown."

Waxman forced a laugh. I had to be kidding. "Let your lawn turn brown? On purpose?"

"Lawns don't make any sense in this part of the country," I told him. "There's not enough water to go around with the west growing like it is, so I thought I'd do my share for conservation. They need water on the plains for farming more than we need it for watering lawns."

Waxman kept the smile, but it was starting to look pained on. His face was sweaty. I noticed that he was wearing a white t-shirt under his short-sleeve dress shirt. That had to be hot. My grandfather was the only person I knew who still wore an undershirt all the time, no matter how hot the season. "But surely," Waxman said, "the covenants . . ."

"This is an old neighborhood," I told him. "The covenants expired ten years ago. I checked. No offense, John, but I wouldn't move into a neighborhood where I was required to have a perfectly green lawn."

From the other side of the house came the faint jingling of bells, and Waxman's kids, two boys and a girl, jumped out of their swings and sprinted toward him.

"Father," said the eldest boy, "may we have money for ice cream?"

Father? I thought. *May we?* What planet did these kids come from?

Waxman smiled a different smile, now. A paternal smile. "Very well," he said, taking some change from his pocket. "If you put it in the Frigidaire *for after dinner*."

The boys, I noticed, wore undershirts like their father.

"An ice cream truck with bells," I said. "That's a lot nicer than those things they have now that belt out recorded music."

Waxman nodded absently. He gave his son two quarters. The kids ran toward the front of the house.

"They aren't going to get much for fifty cents," I said.

"Bill Taylor—have you met the Taylors? Bill Taylor does the ice cream as sort of a hobby. He keeps the prices down. It's a neighborhood tradition." Waxman started to move the hamburgers from the grill to a plate. "Green lawns are a neighborhood tradition too, Dick."

I didn't want to turn this into an argument. After all, I had just moved in, and I had only met Waxman two days ago. So I said, "Well, *your* lawn is certainly lush."

"Yes, it is. Thank you. Keeping it up means a lot to me."

"And I like your landscaping, too. Those are beautiful trees along the back fence." I squinted at them. "Is that a tree house for the kids I see in one of them?"

"No," Waxman said. "That's not for the kids. Say, let's get these burgers on the table before they get cold!"

3

Over the next several days, the neighborhood wives kept coming over to meet my wife. Each one brought a cake or a casserole. They were surprised to learn I was single. "This has always been such a family neighborhood," said more than one.

The lawn was looking a little drought-shocked, and each one of those women commented on it.

"It's so important," one of them said, "to keep things in this neighborhood looking just so."

The other thing they commented on was their surprise at finding me home during the day. I had to explain over and over that I was a painter, that I had set up a studio in the house.

They all wore dresses. Ordinarily, I wouldn't have noticed a thing like that, but Waxman and his undershirt had made me start noticing how people dressed. All the women, and even the little girls, wore dresses. No slacks. No jeans.

4

One afternoon I was staring at a blank canvas, trying to see where the paint wanted to go, when I heard the bells of the ice cream truck. But when I looked out the window, I saw it wasn't a truck at all. It was a tricycle contraption with a white icebox attached to the front of it, and a man in a white suit—Bill Taylor, I supposed—was pedaling the thing down the street.

5

There were spots where the soil was still moist, and the grass grew green and ever taller in those places. But most of the lawn had turned to fine straw. The grass was only dormant, I knew. It would come back with the late-autumn snow, and with the following spring. And

that was fine. I didn't *mind* its being green, just so long as I didn't waste water to make it that way.

6

Bob Evans, the guy next door, had hardly introduced himself before he started to tell me how important it was for me to water my lawn. Letting the lawn go wasn't something I could choose to do, he told me. What I did affected my neighbors.

"Property values?" I said, prepared to smirk.

But it went beyond that, according to Evans. It was something very important about the character of the neighborhood. Certain things had to be just so.

Evans had just come from work. Under his dress shirt, I could see the outline of his white sleeveless undershirt.

"Look," I said. "Next year, if I have a little money, I'll tear out the lawn and landscape with rocks and gravel and drought-resistant plants. It'll look great."

"It won't fit in," Evans said. "Don't you want to fit in?"

He was smiling as he said that, but there was something artificial about his smile. Or about his face. He was balding, and I could see the shape of his skull. Somehow, his face looked like a mask painted over it.

7

Everyone in the neighborhood drove a vintage car. But they were all about the same vintage. Bob Evans drove a maroon Rambler sedan, and his wife had a baby blue Rambler station wagon. The Waxmans had a T-bird and a station wagon—a Chevy with wood panels. Larry and Theresa Smith, across the street from me, an older couple, had an old-style Buick Roadmaster.

My car was the only one on the street made after 1963.

8

I'd walk around the neighborhood after lunch, thinking about my current project, and I'd catch snatches of what the kids were shouting in their back yards. Things like Gee whiz. Neat-o. Boogerface. Shazam. Gosh.

Never: Far out. Rad. Kowabunga. Shithead. Asshole. None of what I was used to hearing from children.

9

One evening, I heard this sound of tinny, canned music. And voices. Angry voices. I looked out my window to see an ice cream truck, the kind I was used to, stopped on the corner.

My neighbors were all around the truck. Some were shaking their fists. Some were yelling at the bewildered driver.

"Get out of here!" I heard Bill Taylor yell. "We don't want your kind around here!" But there was more to this than a matter of competition. The other people out there were yelling the same sort of things.

And they all kept looking, as they shouted, from the ice cream truck to my house. To my lawn.

10

Waxman came to my house one evening, agitated, impatient.

"You want to see what comes of not keeping your lawn up? You want to see it?" he said.

I had brushes to clean before they dried, but he was so close to panic that I agreed to follow him to his house. He took me into his living room and turned the television on. It was an old set, and it took a long time to warm up. While we waited, I looked at the green candy dish that sat on top of the TV's wooden cabinet. The candies inside were barrel-shaped and dark brown, almost black. Horehound, I guessed.

"There!" Waxman said. The screen crackled as it came to life. I went to turn on *Ozzie and Harriet* and I got *this*!

Men and women in tight-fitting clothes gyrated across the screen. The camera zoomed in on body parts, froze, zoomed back out again.

"What is that?" Waxman demanded.

I shrugged. "Looks like MTV to me."

"It's in *color*," Waxman said. "On my screen! Color! Do you see what you're doing? Do you see?" He pointed to his hands. "And look at this, just look!"

Waxman seemed to be about my age. Or he had until now, anyway. The skin on his hands looked papery, and he had liver spots. "Don't you see? You're throwing everything out of kilter! You water that lawn, or there's no telling what might happen!"

11

When I got home, I walked around on the fine straw that was my front lawn. All right, why the hell not water it a little? It bothered me to waste the water, it seemed irresponsible, but there was something a lot bigger than water conservation at stake here. That's how it was beginning to seem. Yeah, all right. I'd water the lawn in the morning.

But that night, I dreamed that I was watching *Father Knows Best* on a wood-cabinet television. It was hot in my living room. I was sweating. I had an undershirt on beneath my dress shirt. The dress shirt collar was starched, and it scratched my neck. A woman with her hair done up in a beehive came into the room—my wife, I realized—and a boy with a crewcut followed her. "Father," said the boy, "may I have fifteen cents to buy an ice cream?"

I dug into my pocket, pulled out a nickel and a dime, and said, "Here you go, sport."

The sheets were damp when I woke up.

"No," I told myself. "I'm sticking to my guns. The lawn is on its own."

12

They tried to do it themselves, the neighbor men with young faces and liver spots on their hands. They'd turn on my garden hose while I was working in my studio.

I'd hear the water running and go outside to find them soaking down the ground.

"Get the hell off my property!" I said.

"But we'll do it," said Bob Evans. "We'll water the lawn! We'll fertilize it and keep it mowed!"

"No," I said. "No lawn! Damn it, I don't want to live that way!"

13

They came in the night. Things like that always get done in the night. But there was no meanness in them. Only desperation. Their faces were getting old, now. Waxman's face in particular had shriveled and gone as papery as his hands. That's what I saw when he turned on the light in my bedroom and they came for me.

They chloroformed me. They held a wad of cotton against my face until I couldn't help but breathe. And I woke up here.

It's the cage in Waxman's back yard, the thing I had thought was a tree house. It's a cube of steel mesh, six feet by six feet and twenty feet off the ground.

On the afternoon of my first day, Waxman came out to see me. He told me they had watered my lawn through the night, really soaked it, and it was already looking better.

Waxman looked better, too.

Then he told me that he was sorry about this. They all were. But it sometimes happened that somebody tried to move into the neighborhood and just couldn't fit in. And that was a problem.

I said, "Let me out of here, John."

He said, "Dick, I'm real sorry, but I just can't do that."

And he went inside to watch *Ozzie and Harriet*. That was the last I've seen of him, except sometimes when I glimpse him through the leaves, watering his lawn.

It's been four days. Four hot days. I never knew thirst could hurt like this. Even my eyes feel pasty and dry.

Somewhere on the other side of the houses, I hear voices. I hear the jangling of the ice cream bell.

And all around, I hear the hiss of lawn sprinklers. I can smell the water. ♦

About the Authors

The word "agenda" has gotten a bad reputation recently; it's often used in a context that makes it seem like a communicable disease—as in "He's obviously got an agenda." However, **Gail Regier** wasn't bashful about writing a story with an agenda when he composed "Relics." He tells us that the story "isn't an 'idle' fiction, whatever that is. Since I wrote it, the U.S. has refused to sign the environmental objectives from the Brazilian conference, to stop (among other things) ozone depletion, global warming, and the destruction of species. Please write your congressperson, and do whatever else you can."

Gail, a member of the English department at the University of Central Florida in Orlando, has been published in such prestigious periodicals as *The Atlantic*, *Harper's*, and *National Forum*. His first sale in the genre appeared in *Aboriginal SF* about a year ago, and "Relics" is his debut story for this magazine.

Since her first appearance in these pages ("Dealer," September 1991), **Michaelene Pendleton** has had a story published in *Asimov's*—and now she's back with "Under the Tattoos," which is her fifth professional

sale. It's a piece of military fiction, but of a type we particularly like, because it drives home the point that soldiers are people, too.

George Zebrowski makes his third appearance as a fiction contributor in the full-sized *AMAZING*® Stories with "I Walked With Fidel," a story that's quite a departure from his usual fare. George has recently sold some science essays to *Omni*, and is working on a new novel, *The Killing Star*, in collaboration with Charles Pellegrino. His previous stories for us were "The Number of the Sand" (August 1991) and "Let Time Shape" (March 1992).

Bruce Holland Rogers recently marked the tenth anniversary of his first publication in the genre (in the June 1982 issue of *F&SF*), at just about the same time that he made his first sale to this magazine with "Green Lawns." One of his newest stories, "Vox Domini," will be seen in the next *Full Spectrum* anthology.

Holly Thomas says her interest in horror surfaced at an early age when she started watching the gothic soap opera "Dark Shadows." More than

twenty years later, she's beginning to make her reputation as a writer of stories in which, as she puts it, "the fantastic or supernatural is used to heighten everyday feelings." Her first sale in the genre was in the Winter 1991/92 issue of *Weird Tales*, and "Animal Magnetism" is sale number two.

Jack Massa is the fourth contributor in this issue who has never been in *AMAZING* Stories before—and for him, "Surface Wars" represents a return to print after not having written much fiction for the last few years. Unlike most writers in the field, his first sale was a novel (*Mooncrow*, published in 1979). He has had stories in *Full Spectrum*, *Best of Omni*, and *F&SF*, among other publications, and he says that selling this latest piece "might get me started again!"

This issue's fiction package is rounded out by the second installment of the **Thomas M. Disch** novel "A Troll of Surewould Forest," as we continue our celebration of Tom's 30th anniversary as a professional writer. The adventures of Joe Doe will conclude next month; we'll see you then. ♦

Animal Magnetism



Holly Thomas

His beard itched. His clothes itched. The restaurant was stifling, the smells of food and bodies and stale air conditioning all jabbing out at him in a constant, low-level assault.

He shouldn't be around people now. It was cabin fever, he'd told himself; he needed to get out into civilization, just for a while. He'd been kidding himself, and he'd known it all along.

The full moon was still two nights away, and already the brunette across the room looked better to him than anything on the menu.

The Silver Steer was one of those steakhouses, casual in a conscious, stylish way. The kind of place that used to have booths until they figured out how many more people they could pack in with strategically staggered tables. He scanned the clutter of oak veneer, searching with faint hope for a hint of open space.

"By the window, please," he told the hostess, his voice an edgy tenor, nothing guttural-sounding about it. He followed her toward a tiny table that looked more appropriate for playing checkers, keenly aware of the heat and scent of so many bodies at such close range. The sealed panes of the

Illustration by Alan Clark

windows wouldn't permit air, but they offered an illusion of openness.

The window had another, less honorable appeal: it put him right next to the dark-haired girl.

A patio next time, he told himself as he reached the table, a small island in the sea of flesh. Of course, he could have stayed up at the cabin. The windows there were enormous, and he slept with all of them open except in the coldest weather. But the isolation offered its own kind of claustrophobia.

He took his seat, window at his right, brunette at his left, most of the room in front of him. His instincts balked at turning his back on a crowd. Without thinking, his eyes scaled the lay of the land: a graying couple, huddled toward each other as if to shut out the threat of the rest of the world; four chattering girls, wearing jeans and an array of colored blouses; another couple, in their thirties, wearing almost-matching business suits. The woman reminded him of a bluejay—her suit gray, her laugh raucous. The brunette to his left, on the other hand . . .

A doe, camouflaged under a rich crown of dark hair. Her eyes were big, round, with just a hint of hollows underneath. Waiflike. The small face belied the fullness of the mouth, now worn in a troubled pout, and the ripeness of the body below it. The front of her red dress scooped around the generous swell of her breasts like a loose sling. And he hadn't missed the sight of her legs underneath the table as he approached—demurely crossed, with lush calves accented by the delicate ankles that supported them. *Little Red Riding Hood . . . You sure are lookin' good. . . .*

He felt hot and stifled again as he tried to breathe what the rest of the patrons felt as cool, fresh air. Picking up the menu, he fanned himself surreptitiously before he opened it, then tried to focus on its contents.

After he ordered, the two of them sat, eyes straight ahead, like passengers waiting for a bus. If she'd seen him at any point, she was doing a good job of not showing it.

I didn't come here for this.

A voice inside responded, *Then what did you come for?*

Human contact.

The other voice was smugly mute.

The elderly couple remained quiet. The group of girls grew more animated as they took a liking to their carafe of the house chablis. The rasp of the business-suited woman's voice was incessant; he couldn't recall hearing her companion once.

It wasn't until his food arrived that he realized the brunette hadn't ordered since he sat down, and nothing had been brought to her table. He turned his head slightly to look in her direction; he'd developed a crick in his neck during the last half hour from the effort of trying to ignore her.

Her eyes, more shadowed than he remembered, were fixed on the entrance, and she was gnawing at breadsticks like a second set of fingernails. Cellophane wrappers littered the table in front of her. It was such a cliché it was almost funny. Averting his eyes, he sawed into his

rare steak, feeling like a cliché himself. The juices of the meat flooded his mouth, strangely unsatisfying.

When he tried to limit his focus to his plate, the room's closeness pressed in on him again. He raised his head. For the first time he was grateful for the musty draft of the air conditioning; it brought him the smell of her perfume and, better, underneath, the scent of her skin, sweet and slightly sharp. Tangy.

When he looked down again, his steak was almost gone.

The waitress came to the brunette's table, removed the accumulated cellophane wrappers and replaced the basket of breadsticks with a discreet silence that made it clear the girl had been there for some time before he arrived. "If you need anything else, let me know," the waitress said quietly before moving away, and he blessed the woman for her tact.

The older couple was leaving. The girls had exhausted the chablis, and some of their energy along with it. The businesswoman was talking to her boyfriend about condos, and he wanted to scream at the man to come to his senses.

And the brunette was picking up her purse, a thin-strapped black thing that had been resting on the floor next to her thin-strapped black shoes. Temptation was about to leave him unscathed—victory by default—and he scrambled for the words to keep her from going.

Of course, his mouth was full.

She stood, the left side of her hem lingering at mid-thigh for a moment before falling into place just below her knee.

He swallowed the half-eaten bite and found the inside of his mouth amazingly, instantaneously dry. "Excuse me."

She looked at him, wide eyes politely blank in an expression that managed to say, *It's none of your business.*

Still casting for words, he settled on, "You aren't eating?"

Her smile was wry. "It's okay. I'm on a diet." She pushed her chair in as though that gesture would close the conversation.

Involuntarily his eyes skimmed down her body—full, yes, but in all the right places. He refrained from the obvious unnecessary comments. "You should eat something," he plowed on ineffectually. "Let me buy you dinner."

"No, thanks." She glanced back at her table, probably pondering how much to tip for water and breadsticks.

There was nothing to lose. He blurted, "Just because some jerk stood you up is no reason to go hungry."

She brought him back into prompt, sharp focus, as though seeing him for the first time. Her dark eyes went defiant, and he could see her wavering between wanting to defend the jerk and wanting to call him a jerk herself.

That trembling defiance brought an inspiration. "Besides," he said, "what if he finally *does* show up?"

He saw a smile steal across her face as the image took shape in her mind.

"He's got two kids," she said, although he hadn't asked. "He said something about a birthday party; I guess he

forgot." She jabbed a fork into her salad—apparently she really was on a diet—with unnecessary vigor. "I should be used to it by now."

"And he was meeting you here?" The Silver Steer didn't strike him as much of a place to meet for a date. But what did he know?

She shrugged, breasts lifting enticingly inside their red bodice. He dropped the subject. The absent boyfriend was the last thing he wanted to talk about.

She hit on the next to last: "So, why are *you* eating alone?"

"I'm from out of town," he said, hoping that would be sufficient. She cocked her head, waiting for him to continue. Her curiosity, casual as it was, stirred his discomfort; it was an effort not to fidget. "A little place about two hours north of here."

"What do you do there?" Her head was still cocked in that listening posture. Ears pricked for the approaching hunter.

"Rough it. I've got a cabin up there, nothing fancy. I like things pretty basic." He grinned at his own honesty; what sounded like small talk to her was more revealing than she could know. "Fresh air, open space, not many people . . ." *No one within a ten-mile sprint . . .*

She speared a cherry tomato with delicate grace. "I'd go nuts."

"It's not for everybody."

Her salad bowl was emptying and he was running out of things to say. When the check arrived, he half expected her to grapple for the bill and a quick escape route, but instead she sat with one finger sliding along the moist rim of her water glass, eyes focused somewhere just in front of or beyond him.

He said, "Do you want coffee or anything?"

She shook her head. "Thanks." She flushed, suddenly awkward.

He wasn't sure what she was thanking him for—the offer of coffee, the dinner, possibly even the company—but it was clearly his cue to pick up the tab.

He slid the check toward his side of the table, felt her staring at his hand as he did so. He glanced down in alarm, catching reflexively for a thickening in the dark, coarse hairs that spattered across his knuckles. Nothing. With silent relief he flipped the tab face up.

Time was running out as he reached for his wallet. He could still walk her to her car, he thought.

Let her go, the voice said.

This time it'll be different, he insisted in response.

He laid the money on the table, not forgetting a good-sized tip for the waitress who had so patiently kept serving the breadsticks.

The woman's car was a little brown Dodge Colt. He fumbled for options while she fished for her keys, afraid that any move on his part might be misconstrued, or construed correctly. She got her keys into the lock, the door open, before she turned around to face him. She no longer seemed so anxious to escape, perhaps having concluded he wasn't going to maul her outright.

"This was nice of you," she said finally, large dark eyes still searching his face for a motive.

"I wanted the company." It was meant to be a disclaimer; it sounded more like a confession.

Her face upturned, there was no question now that she was waiting. The fresh night air that had been such a relief a moment ago seemed to have deserted him, leaving him strangled by her scent, her heat.

"I'd like to see you," he said. She nodded, still waiting. Her soft mouth made him eager, and his eagerness made him stammer. "When are you free?"

She bit her lip, and in his mind he saw a well of bright red surface there. He wanted to taste it—only a taste, he swore, only a taste. When she spoke, the illusion broke. "Next week isn't too good," she said. "I've got the late shift." The job didn't sound much better than the boyfriend.

"How about the weekend?"

She shook her head without speaking, and he knew what that meant. The boyfriend. If he bothered to show up. She inclined her head, brightening slightly. "But I'm free Sunday night."

Two nights from now. The moon would be full. He could feel it behind him, burning into his skull, making his thoughts a fevered chaos. If he waited, she would be gone. . . .

The moon cast a sheen on her small face, painting her for him; face waxen, eyes luminous. A little girl lost in the woods. There was no way he could hurt someone like this.

This time it'll be different.

He smiled. "Sunday night it is."

He raised a hand toward the small point of her chin, but she reached up first with surprising readiness, searching for something to cling to. He made the kiss gentle, one hand trembling as he stroked her hair, one fist clenching around the soft dark strands. Drawing her closer, he moved past her mouth to her cheek, her temple, and found an earlobe, delicate and tender. For a moment he savored it, its taste dangerously provocative.

Her arms tightened around his neck, the embrace of someone possibly as hungry as he was.

Another quiet dinner. A brief moment of panic beforehand when he recalled that sometimes the finer restaurants used real silver. Fortunately, in that respect Brentano's turned out to be just as cheap as most places.

She was wearing black tonight, and it suited her as well as the red had. The color made her eyes darker, her skin paler. Some of the shadows were gone from her eyes, though they still retained a hint of that hollow, haunted look. He didn't disapprove. A thin gold chain bearing a ruby heart decorated her throat. The neckline of her dress didn't fall as low tonight, but the scant straps over her shoulders were nearly as maddening.

He made it a point to eat well.

He had steak, rare; she ordered chicken Kiev. If she showed a little too much fondness for their fifty-dollar bottle of chardonnay, he didn't mind. It made her a little more talkative, a little less inquisitive.

"The patio was a nice idea," she said.

He nodded agreement, glad the late summer evening

had permitted it. The restaurant's terrace was sheltered by a canvas awning, but the open sides allowed real air to flow through. And, for now, they had it to themselves. She took another drink of wine, the rim of the glass reflecting in her eyes as twin arcs, a pair of crescents. But her pupils were round and full the way the moon was tonight. Blood pounded in his ears: a responding tide.

A strand of hair clipped near her chicken. She brushed her hair back, over her shoulder angling more skin. "I really should get this cut." She met his eyes over her plate, searching for reaction.

Her hair hung around her shoulders, falling just short of her breasts. He didn't have to deliberate. "Don't touch it."

She smiled as though reassured. She tilted her head, and dark hair slid forward again. "What do you look like without a beard?"

"I don't know." It sounded so ridiculous he grinned. "I gave up trying to shave it." He brushed his whiskers the wrong way, producing a coarse, scraping sound. "I've just got one of those... twelve-musk shadows."

She laughed. He tried to remember if he'd seen her laugh the other night, he didn't think so. It gave a child-like lightness to her features, bringing out dimples beneath the corners of her mouth.

She could be the one, he thought. With her he might be able to break the jinx, shatter the pattern. She could be his salvation.

The ruby necklace gleamed. For a moment it became a drop of blood.

The waiter's arrival broke the unpleasant vision. He gathered their dishes with quiet haste, as though anxious not to disturb them. "Will there be anything else?" The man stood well away from the table.

He ran into this kind of apprehension, especially from men, too often. He looked across the table at her, she shook her head. "Everything's fine, thanks."

With a fractional bow, the waiter retreated as though reprieved.

The man's uneasy defensiveness hadn't escaped her. She looked puzzled. "Do you come here often?"

"First time." He freshened her half-empty wine glass. "You?"

"A couple of years ago." A faint crease between her brows. "With an old boyfriend." She took a larger than normal drink of the chardonnay. "He was bad news."

"I'm sorry." It seemed like the best thing to say. A hunch made him venture quietly. "The one you're seeing now—is he married?"

She slid her glass toward her, watched the wine rock back and forth. "He says he's not." She looked up with a self-deprecating smile. "I haven't always had the best luck, she said."

"Yeah, well..." He lifted his glass. "Here's to changing luck."

Their glasses clinked.

Back in front of her apartment building, she put her arms around his neck, the intercom glaring from beside the door like a disapproving sentry. The moon, another

sentry, was three-quarters of the way to the top of the sky.

"Do you want to come up?" Her legs were just below his jawline.

Could he do it?

She pulled back, her eyes reflecting uncertainty. He wanted to tell her there were worse things than rejection. Forcing a smile, he ran the tip of his tongue under his teeth, reassured to find only flat, dull moons. "I'd love to."

She led him past the politely planted greenery of the building's grounds, not letting go of his hand until she turned her key in the lock of her apartment. *Open the door and let me in.*

Where his cabin had almost no furniture at all, her apartment was a jumble that had the look of yard-sale acquisitions and old furniture from friends. A ragged section of claw marks on the couch caught his eye and he suffered. "Do you have a cat?" He tried to quell the feeling of hairs rising at the back of his neck.

There was a puzzled pause before she followed his eyes to the worn side of the couch. "Oh. No. The sofa is from an old boyfriend." He wondered which one. Looking around the apartment again, he suspected the furniture might have quite a history.

"Can I get you a drink?" She approached a small, stone fireplace across from the couch and, before he knew what she was doing, turned a switch on the wall. Fire flared up instantaneously. He flinched back, felt hairs rise again on the nape of his neck. A sight that wouldn't have troubled him a week ago left him staring, transfixed, with something like terror.

She laughed at his reaction. "Sorry. It's a gas fireplace. I didn't mean to waste you."

He couldn't take his eyes from the uncrying, licking flames, unfolding the fake log, consuming nothing. The back of his neck was drenched in sweat. "Don't you think it's a little warm for that?"

"Sorry." She reacted quickly to the sharpness in his voice, the flames fell and vanished. His sweat turned cold, now a thin layer that coated his body. "I could open the windows," she offered, anxious to compensate.

Windows. Good for air, for breathing. Bad when the screams came. But there weren't going to be any screams, he reminded himself. "Open them," he said.

She pulled back the drapes, admitting moonlight, and slid the casement windows open. Returning, she came up and put her arms around his waist. "I just thought fire was romantic."

He grinned at her, at himself, feeling foolish, wishing the back of the shirt she clung to wasn't damp with perspiration. He thought of creating a long, explanatory yarn—*My entire family was torched in front of my eyes when I was five years old—and discarded it.* "It's okay."

Some measure of tension went out of her arms and the tentative smile returned. "You didn't tell me if you wanted a drink."

His dimmishes had vanished, leaving him once again saturated and hot. "Water," he said without hesitation.

While she went to the kitchen, he went to the windows.

drinking in as much cool air as they could offer. Outside, the pavement glowed with faint illumination, not all of it from the street lamps. Unwillingly his eyes dragged upward. Near the top of the window frame, his nemesis glowed, casting down a white-hot light that only he could see, a wide floodlamp glaring down on an enormous stage. He felt its reach, pressing in on him, making his clothes feel constricted. No. He closed his eyes and took deep breaths, willing himself to stay who he was.

Muffled steps behind him in the pile rug accompanied her return. "It's full, isn't it?" she said, resting a hand at the small of his back.

He jerked his eyes away from the moon and turned to face her. "I guess that's romantic too." He tried to smile.

"Isn't it?" Uncertainty looked back at him again.

He brushed a strand of hair back from her temple. "I guess so." He worked harder on the smile. His behavior since he walked in had been erratic at best, and she had no way of knowing why. *My fiancée died a horrible death on the night of a full moon.* That wouldn't be a lie.

She held a glass in each hand, a tall one with water for him, a new glass of wine for her. He took his glass from her hand and clinked it lightly against the smaller one. He echoed his litany: *This time will be different.*

She said, "Let's sit down."

He chose the end of the couch farthest from the claw marks. She sank close to him, setting her wine glass on the nicked wooden coffee table in front of them. Nudging her feet against one another, she squirmed out of her shoes. He found himself absorbed in the wriggling of her red-painted toenails; they looked strangely like delicacies. He averted his eyes to her face. "Isn't this a little scary for you?"

"Having you here? A little." She met his eyes. "I try to go by my instincts."

Whoever came up with the idea that instincts were to be trusted? He kept his eyes on her, his head turned away from the moon, wishing he'd thought to close the drapes. Fresh air seemed secondary now. "I'm nervous," he confessed.

His admission seemed to give her a new confidence. Her voice was low and direct when she spoke again: "You shouldn't be."

It was as close to an invitation as he was going to get.

Leaning forward, he set his glass neatly next to hers on the coffee table. When he straightened, she was there to meet him as he reached for her. A good sign, he told himself. The taste of her mouth nearly overwhelmed him, and he reminded himself that this was a treat to be tasted, not devoured. Ripe flesh invited his touch, but he forced himself to wait, to explore less extravagant pleasures: the delicate ridges of bone that formed her shoulderblades, her spine, her ribs. Black fabric whispered between his fingers and her raw skin, a tenuous barrier.

Behind him a breeze entered the room, and he felt the moon slip in with it. His mind filled with unwelcome thoughts: red sections of meat, the rich scent of blood, the sweet, intimate taste of marrow. Heat crawled under his skin. One of her thighs slid over his knee, and he gripped the leg, none too gently; his nails, still flat and

blunt, scraped across the nylon. Something scratched at his nerves as the crawling beneath his skin threatened to surface, and then her tongue slid between his teeth. His reaction shook him with the force of an electric current. With a near impossible effort he pulled back, shuddering.

She leaned back to look up at him, her hands clasped behind his neck. It took him a moment to comprehend who and what she was. *The doe*, he thought, and then she was pulling him down, reclining toward the arm of the couch. Her head arched back, exposing an appetizing jugular.

He stiffened against the pull of her arms. "Not yet," he gasped. He wondered how long it had been since he last breathed. The voice wasn't his, a record played at the wrong speed.

"What's wrong?" Her face was troubled, lips slightly parted, all the softer under the damned luminescence.

He didn't speak, not trusting his voice. His skin still bristled.

And then she smiled in the silence, an encouraging smile that misunderstood completely. Trailing her hands down, she parted his shirt, her fingers cool against his feverish skin. She pulled the shirt free of his belt, setting off a trail of goose bumps.

"I want you," she whispered into the hair of his chest. Her hands slid down, caressing his sides, soothing the heat, while her tongue played lightly across his skin, as delicately as rain. The crawling itch faded, replaced by a different feeling of slowly growing warmth. He took one of her hands and held it to his heart, willing her to tame it. The woman and the animal, the predator and the domesticator. *I can do this*, he thought. She could break the spell. She could be the one.

When at last they were together, he was almost able to dismiss as unimportant the light at his back. She was his moon and he was the tide, surging back and forth. Her pull increased; he rushed to meet it, hurtling toward redemption. *Save me*, he thought, burying his face in her hair to hide his tears.

And then her cries were joined by the sound of his own panting, no longer quite human. The heat was back, pricking across his skin with the speed and voracity of a brush fire, and then the flames exploded. The transformation was violent, like bursting out of his skin, giving birth to a new, more powerful self. Pain gave way to freedom and strength; her body tightened around him as he emitted a guttural rumble.

Everything was clearer now, painted in clean shades of black, white and gray. He looked down at the doe beneath him; its eyes were tightly closed. They stayed that way when he drew fine talons across the rib cage and up between the breasts. He heard the tearing sound, saw the deep, jagged wound from her soft belly to the base of her throat. Her body jerked and convulsed around him.

He heard her try to speak, but the words were meaningless. Tongue dripping, he lowered his head to the well-spring of her throat. Piercing claws pinned her shoulders as he parted his jaws. Pure white light beamed its approval. And somewhere deep inside him, a man despaired.

She was not the one. ♦

Surface Wars

Jack Massa

My enemy lies with his back to the wall of the alley. His eyes are glazed and his mouth hangs open. His chest rises and falls, the lungs still gasping air. Where my pike tore through his belly, the blood wells in a puddle and spills over his gray velvet coat.

My first kill. But instead of exultation, the sight fills me with distress. A senseless emotion, I force it aside. I must see to my duty and retrieve him.

Immense walls of blackened concrete stretch above us, ending far overhead in a narrow ribbon of wintry sky. Behind me, the whine of motors and the cries of battle have dwindled. The fight has ended, or moved on down the boulevard. Now there's only the bluster of the wind—cold and biting here on the surface.

His hand lies stiff on the filthy pavement, clutching the handle of his saber. My pike pointed at him, I step forward cautiously. I raise my boot and stomp down hard on his wrist. He groans as his fingers spring open. His eyes seem to focus on me as I kick the weapon out of his reach.

Now I toss the pike aside and kneel down beside him. Opening my shoulder-pack, I



Illustration by Frank Kelly Freas

take out the neural recorder. His eyes widen as I attach the terminals to his forehead and scalp. Suddenly he coughs, bringing up mucus and blood. Then the awareness fades from his eyes again.

Opening the gold buttons at his throat, I find a gauzy white scarf adorned with purple flowers. The favor of his lady. I wonder if she will weep for him. Tugging the scarf aside, I read his name tag: "Maximilian DeVrees, son of Ernst, Clan 617."

I attach the receiver nodes to my temples and check the connections to the recorder. Then I straighten my back, draw my saber and touch its edge lightly to the epaulettes on his shoulders.

"I, Jahn Otto Hoffner of Clan 974, having defeated you in honorable combat, claim the privilege of retrieval. So that your valor be long remembered, so that your life be enshrined in the Global Mind for future generations of heroes, so that you may join the venerated company of the Elect, yield to me, your vanquisher, the record of your memory."

I sit down beside him, setting my back against the wall. Reaching over, I flip the toggle to start the device.

There is a jolt and a humming of white sparks. Then there comes a moment of curious blankness, a deadening of all sensation and thought.

Suddenly I am riding a charger into battle, my whole body quivering with the roar of its motor.

Warriors of a rival clan rush toward me, mounted and on foot, lances and pikes leveled. They wear green coats with gold trimming, and red plumes in gilded helmets.

They are my colors. My clan.

For a moment I am baffled and terrified, before I recognize what has happened. I am inside the mind of Maximilian DeVrees. While his total memory flows to the recorder, I experience those moments foremost in his mind, his dying recollections. *It is only the ritual*, I tell myself. *I am still Jahn Hoffner*. But the fear clings to me. And as the awareness of my own identity flickers away again I wonder: Is it his fear or mine?

I lower my lance point, gripping the steering rod with my free hand. I duck my head behind the transparent shield as my charger plunges past the first of the enemy.

Melodious music of flutes and strings drifts through the spacious ballroom. Musicians, in black coats and white lace collars, play on a circular dais in the center of the green marble floor. All around the dais, dancing couples twirl in languid rhythm, men in lamé jackets or stiff clan uniforms, women in tight bodices and flowing, ruffled gowns.

My vantage point is a broad gallery overlooking the dance floor. Behind me, scores of children chase and play on trampolines, climbing bars, and carousels. They are dressed as I am, in simple tunics, tights, and slippers.

My legs dangling between the translucent rails of the balustrade, I gaze down to where the elder members of my family converse with others of the clan.

There stands my father, balding, gray-mustached, stoutly muscular. Father still favors the clan's military uniform,

though he is many years retired from the surface wars. Next to him stands Rudy, square-jawed and curly-haired, a younger, trimmer image of Father. Nearby, in a clump of women, stands my mother, heavy and placid of demeanor. Mother allows my sisters, Greta and Elgi, to carry most of the requisite chatter.

But where is my other brother, Hermann? He is fourteen, in the transition year when he no longer stays with the children, but is still some months from manhood. Yet he is not with the family. I scan the vast ballroom for some moments before I spot him. Hovering in a corner, somber and tense, Hermann is speaking with two clerics, tall gaunt men with swept-back hair and satiny black robes.

As I wonder about this, I am distracted by shouting behind me. Two younger boys are fighting. Immediately, an instructor glides toward them on whirling wheels, red lights blinking. The instructor is a seven-foot, cylindrical unit with multiple swivel arms and perceptors linked directly to the Global Mind. Its mere approach quells the disturbance. The two boys bow awkwardly to the machine as they back hurriedly away.

"Maxy. There you are!"

I turn my head as a girl, dark and slim, kneels beside me. Beneath heavy brows her brown eyes beam with mischief. She leans over and kisses my cheek. She is Karina, whom I've known since my days in nursery. She is of my clan, a third cousin, and closer to my heart than anyone, including my own family.

"You're late." My voice sounds petulant. "I've been waiting up here for nearly an hour."

"It's not my fault. Silly Angelica couldn't decide how to style her hair. Then it was which color eyelenses. Then whether her new duenna should be worn in her earring or tiara. Such fussing! I trust that at my premiere ball I'll act a trifle more mature."

"No doubt your propriety will be the envy of the clan matrons."

Karina smiles at my teasing, then sits beside me and lets her legs dangle like mine. I stare at her a moment, then turn away, a thick sadness rising in my throat. Tonight her hair is loose and free as I've always known it. But in only a few more seasons, she will be wearing the styled tresses and the duenna cell.

And I will be wearing the clan uniform.

Karina motions toward the floor, where her parents and elder sisters are being greeted by a line of cadets from various clans. "Look at Angelica, acting so shy. Do you know, she was half an hour deciding which scarf to stuff in her bosom? I pity the warrior that ends up her betrothed. That is, I would, except he'll probably be as vain and pompous as she. Look at that one in the orange. Honestly, Maxy, don't you think young men look silly in those coats?"

"Will you find me silly when I put on the uniform?"

She eyes me seriously, then breaks into a grin. "Doubtlessly. But at least you won't act as self-important as most of them."

Impulsively, I seize her hand and start to speak. I want to ask her promise that she will not change, and that our feelings for each other won't be contaminated by the

passage into adulthood. But I realize how absurd that sounds even as I wish it.

"Come, I tell her. "I'll push you on the swing."

I weave among the greencoats, thrusting at one rider, then another, driving on before anyone can engage me. I am conscious of the cameras suspended over the street, recording the battle. I wish to fight just enough to avoid their notice, to escape reprimand.

Reaching the rear of the enemy ranks, I pivot and skirt along the fringes of the battle, striking here and there at a rider. The young ones, beardless faces betray their flight. They dodge and retreat as I ride near. Some thrust defensively with their pikes. But I am careful to ride crouched on the charger, offering a small and fleeting target.

"Who have you been talking to? Tell me who put these ideas in your mind?"

While with rage, Father screams at my brother Hermann. My mother, sisters, and I sit in stunned silence around the dining table. Our chalked soap in its crystal bowls is forgotten in the wake of his announcement.

"No one did, Father," Hermann answers in quiet, angry tones. "It is my own idea."

"Your idea? Well, you can kill that idea at once!" I brought you up to be a man, not a beardless gelding."

"Erm, please," Mother says. "Not in front of the girls."

My sisters cringe in their seats, shoulders hunched and eyes downcast. I return my gaze to Father and Hermann, horrified and fascinated by their confrontation.

"It is not your decision, Father," Hermann declares. "It is mine, and I have made it. I will not change my mind."

"Your decision? Father leans to his feet, out of control. "Your decision to disgrace us. To dishonor us." With a cry of grief and frustration he grabs his water goblet and flings it against the wall. It falls to the carpet unbroken, leaving a wet stain on the flowered wallpaper.

Father sinks into his chair, moaning like one bereft.

"Your decision. What have I done to be punished so?"

Mother stands. "Children, please leave the table. You also, Hermann. I will speak to your father."

She ushers us from the dining room. Hermann strides down the long, carpeted hallway toward the bedroom we share. I run to keep up.

"Hermann, wait for me."

"There's nothing to say, Max. I would never have told Father unless I was sure."

I don't wish to change your mind. Only to understand."

Puzzling at the door to our room, he searches my face. The stern lines of his expression soften. "Come in, then."

I follow him into the room we have shared since I was three. Our beds lie against a far wall, and near them our desks with their readers and stacks of textbooks. The rest of the wide floor is scattered with our play equipment and toys.

Hermann tosses a plastic tubet out of a chair and flops down. His long legs stretch out, his heels resting on the carpet. He is fourteen, only a few months from taking the uniform. But now that will never be.

I stand looking at him, holding my hands in front of me. I think of all the years the three of us—Rudy, Hermann, and I—have played battle games together, stalking each other through the family apartments, riding our scooters in the gymnasium. For three years Rudy has fought in the real surface wars, bringing pride to our family. I always expected that Hermann and I would naturally follow his example.

"Let me try to explain it," Hermann says. "You know I always assumed I would join the wars. We are raised to think of this as the most honorable calling, especially in this family. But this past year, as my time grew nearer, I began to question why it should be so. Why should we risk our lives for five years, to kill other boys who might have been our friends in childhood and might be again when we grow older? All because we are divided into certain clans, because the Global Mind has decreed it should be so? It began to seem more and more senseless."

Hermann glances up to gauge my reaction. I only stare, too frightened to speak.

"I know, what I'm saying sounds impious. I don't mean it that way. I just feel made that it is wrong, at least for me. And we are taught that for boys who feel this way the clericalship is an honorable mode of service."

But to give up your manhood."

The surgery is painless. Besides, what am I really giving up, except the right to marry and have children?"

You will never sleep with the fleet is my immediate thought. Of course, clones too are subsumed into the Global Mind upon their deaths. But like women, they exist in a different mode, their status inferior to that of departed warriors.

"Perhaps it is only cowardice," Hermann's voice is flat.

Plainly, that is what Father believes. Please remember, Maximilian. I do not recommend this choice to you. You asked me, and so I have told you my feelings. When the time comes, you must make your own decision."

Rudy is home on leave, having just been promoted from pikeman to lancer. For two days, our family sits in the living room while Father prods interrogations of Rudy and his new charger. We chatter and murmur our approval in a mood of excited festivity. How fine Rudy looks in his new uniform, how potent and fearsome his mount. We discuss endlessly the finer points of each image, debating over how they should be retouched, and which ought to be converted to statuary for the family trophy caves and the Clan Lodge Hall.

Rudy accepts all the attention with a soldier's stoic modesty. But I can tell that beneath the surface he is pleased and proud.

Father makes all of us stand amid the laserguns, so his camera can record additional mementos. He insists that I, in particular, dress in a play uniform and pose with a toy saber. I feel awkward and embarrassed by the charade, but Father commands me with mounting insistence and shrillness.

"Stand like a soldier. Remember your family's name."

I do my best to comply, though I tremble and ache inside. The cause of Father's near-hysteria is all too ob-

vious. No one in the family has even been permitted to speak Hermann's name in the months since he left to join the clerics.

The fourth day of Rudy's visit, he and Father come to me early in the morning. Father has arranged a great surprise, a privilege rarely granted to boys who are under the age. I am to accompany Rudy to visit the clan barracks. I will even be allowed to ride as a passenger on his charger.

I feign enthusiasm, for fear of rousing Father's displeasure. In fact, I'd refuse the invitation if I could. It's only ten months till my fifteenth birthday. I'd prefer not to face the surface world until I must.

That afternoon, Rudy and I ride a lift down more than a hundred stories. Clan warriors are barracked on the lowest levels of the enormous towers that make up our city. Rudy and I march through stark, chilly corridors, past sentries who snap to attention as we pass.

Rudy seems mildly uncomfortable to have his younger brother in tow. But he dutifully shows me through the barracks, and presents me to his commanders and fellow soldiers. Most of them I already know to some degree. They are familiar to me from school and gymnasium, some of them Rudy's friends. Now they seem much older, hardened. They joke that I had better get stronger, build my upper body if I'm to carry a pike. But underneath their bravado I sense a gray nervousness, a dreary feeling of doom.

Later, Rudy takes me to the vehicle deck, a cavernous, unheated chamber full of a dank, oily smell. There the clan's chargers stand parked in precise rows, their mirror-steel armor glinting in lantern light. He shows me his mount, newer than the rest, with his name etched in a gold panel near the driver's stick.

"There it is, Max. What do you think?"

I smile and nod. "Sleek."

"Go ahead, climb into the saddle."

I hesitate, afraid the machine might tip over. But Rudy gestures his encouragement, and I swing my leg over the seat. The mount seems even bigger than I expected, far larger than I could ever drive.

"Before we take her out for a ride, I want to talk to you." Rudy frowns, unsure how to begin. "I suppose you can guess why Father arranged this outing for us."

"Of course. He's afraid I might choose the clerichip, as Hermann did."

Rudy snorts. "I told him his fears are groundless. You're not having doubts, are you Max?"

I wrap my palm around the steering rod. Disengaged, it moves easily to the touch. "Of course not."

How could I ever admit them to Rudy, who has always been my hero, the family's ideal?

But Rudy surprises me. "All of us are somewhat afraid, Max. All of us. We can't help it, it's instinct, part of our animal nature. But, you know, I feel that the true test of manhood is what you do with that fear. To face it and conquer it, that's what lifts us above our animal selves, puts us in touch with the plane of pure intelligence, the plane of the Global Mind. That's how we become worthy to join the Elect, do you see? We're lucky to be males,

to have that chance. That's why I grieve for Hermann, because that's what he has given up."

I've never heard Rudy speak like this, never heard anyone explain things this way. I stare at my brother and wonder what courage it must have taken for him to reveal his inner fears to me.

"I won't let you down, Rudy. I promise."

"I know you won't, Max."

In the midst of the battle, another charger rams mine. My back wheel skids and I jerk furiously at the stick and lean out to the side to regain balance. I'm rushing toward a greencloth. He spots me and on reflex crouches and points his pike, bracing it against the pavement. I try to raise my lance to fend it off, but I am hurtling out of control. All I can do is lean aside, but it's not enough. The speed of the charger carries me onto his point, the steel ripping sideways into my belly.

For a frozen instant I see his young face, startled and awed. Then the mount is hurtling one way and my body another.

A pungent scent of incense hovers in the dry air. Electric candles, yellow sparks in frosted glass, burn at the edges of the mirrorsteel bier. Inside the acrylic coffin lies my brother Rudy.

Or rather, his broken shell. His essence has already been transmitted into the Global Mind, though it will be some days before his memories are fully processed, so that we may commune with his eidolon.

Father, Mother, my sisters and I sit on red velvet chairs in the funeral chamber. Occasionally one of my parents rises to greet clanmembers who have come to pay their respects. I hear Father remark how the morticians have done such a laudable job restoring Rudy's face, which was half torn away. All I can think is how white he looks, and how strange the tiny threads they used to sew shut his lips and eyelids.

Mother begins to sniffle. A black-gloved hand trembles up to daub her eyes. Father leans over her. Disapproval sharpens his whisper.

"No more of that. His death is glorious. I'll not have your maudlin whimpering ruin his funeral day."

Mother gets up and leaves the room until she can compose herself. This is the third time she has had to retire.

While she is gone, Hermann appears at the open doorway. His figure, in the long white cassock of an acolyte, is outlined against the brighter light of the corridor.

My sisters and I hold our breath. All of us wonder how Father will react.

Hermann walks forward with rigid formality, bows at the waist, and speaks to Father.

"I came as soon as I heard. Rudy was a valorous son and an honor to our clan. You have my heartfelt sympathy, and that of my superiors."

Hermann has chosen to stress his role of acolyte before that of son. His last phrase serves as a subtle reminder of his new independence from the family. Perhaps it is also meant to warn Father that to insult Hermann now would be to insult his clerical order as well.

But Father speaks politely. "Thank you for coming so soon. Please do us the honor of sitting there, next to Maximilian."

Hermann is plainly touched to be seated with the family. He replies with a heartfelt murmur. "Thank you, Father."

He sits down next to me and pats me on the forearm. "Are you all right, Max?"

I nod. "It's good to see you."

I'm about to congratulate him on his handling of Father, when I look up to see Father standing over me.

"Maximilian, you are not to speak to Hermann. I don't want his tainted views of life influencing you."

Father turns and marches back to his chair. Hermann stares straight ahead, and I see tears shining in his eyes.

I want to cry for him, but I swallow back the emotion. I realize now, more than ever, that I have no choice. With Rudy gone and Hermann in the clericship, I alone am left to carry the family's honor into battle. Whatever secret wishes I've had about abrogating this duty must be extinguished. There is a fluttering in my stomach, but it is almost a feeling of relief. I am grateful the last burden of doubt has been lifted from me.

I march in a line of boys dressed in crisp cadet uniforms. In a crawling pace measured by the throb of drums, we file across an enclosed, transparent bridge. Through the curving walls I see the concrete and polymetal towers of our city—massive structures connected at various heights by bridges such as this. Hundreds of meters below my feet, dingy in the smog of industry, lie the bottoms of the towers and the ancient, decaying streets of the surface.

At the end of the bridge the line passes through a tall, pointed archway. We enter a monumental plaza with towering blue-tinted walls and a floor alive with pulsing electric sparks beneath its blue polymer surface. The plaza is crowded with family and well-wishers from our various clans. The men wear their colorful uniforms, mostly with jackets open where their bellies sag. The women are in their best finery, enormous petal-like dresses, tiaras of shimmering gemstones and wire. I spot my parents and sisters, watching from the center of the crowd.

Our slow and monotonous steps never alter as we approach the main portal of the Communatorium, arched and pillared in mirrorsteel. As I tread past the first of the multiple pillars, I risk a sideward glance. My distorted reflection stares back at me, small and dark, with hunted eyes, and I am gripped by a fleeting panic. I picture myself breaking from the line and dashing through the plaza, to the astonished and outraged cries of my elders.

But of course the fantasy passes, and I continue marching in perfect, funeral cadence. This moment of ceremony is really no more a turning point than any other. My whole life moves in a preordained trajectory, like a long and stately march.

Inside the Communatorium, the air is heavy with flowery incense. The floor and walls glitter with ever-changing patterns of blue light, the walls curving upward to dim, inaccessible vaults where blue veins sparkle and flicker. We march to the first rows of benches and take our places.

The portentous drumbeat ceases when the last of the cadets has sat down. Our families and clanspeople file in to fill the rows behind us. Finally, there is silence.

A small cleric in gray and purple robes moves to the rail at the edge of the frontal dais. He is a tiny figure in the vastness, but his image is projected in the lasergram-field that rises over the dais, so that the cleric appears to loom to the very vault.

"It is my privilege this day," he says, "to welcome and ordain seventy-three new warriors of the Clans. This is a joyous occasion. Today, you who are boys, become men. Today you join the ranks of the heroes who have served in the surface wars since the birth of our society. The brilliance of your future is assured, for so it is arranged for mankind by the benevolence of the Global Mind.

"Many of you will survive your years of warfare and graduate to the pleasures of marriage and fatherhood. Others will fall in the tumult and glory of battle. But no matter. So long as you die with honor, whether in battle or the peace of old age, you are guaranteed to join the ranks of the Elect. Upon your deaths you will be transfigured. Your minds will be subsumed into that sacred sphere within the Global Mind reserved for heroes. There you will dwell in a bliss of sensation and power beyond our puny mortal brains' capacity to even imagine. . . ."

His speech rambles on and on, but I find it hard to listen. I am thinking of Rudy, wondering in what sense he still lives within the Global Mind. Of course his memories have been preserved, and an idolon constructed that the living can speak with. But is there a true continuity of his person? Such philosophical ponderings are discouraged by the clerics who teach us in school. I think of Hermann, who sacrificed his manhood to avoid just this dilemma. Perhaps his choice was wisest after all.

Abruptly it seems, the drums are pounding again, and the cadets are in front of me marching toward the dais. They look small as they approach it, then huge as their figures appear mirrored in the lasergram-space.

Soon it is my turn. I rise with the others in my row and march slowly forward, deliberately straight and firm.

Close up, I see the robed cleric has tiny, deep-set eyes and boyish-smooth cheeks. He wields an electric rod and taps it sharply on my forehead. The ritual touch of pain stabs behind my eyes for an instant, then floods away to a dull numbness. The cleric moves on, and his acolytes come and hand me a saber and sash.

I tumble on the pavement, smashing an elbow and bruising my side. Reflexes take over and I scramble to a crouching position. But as I rise, a wrenching pain tears at my middle. I glance down and see the bloody wound.

I cover the gash with my forearm. My lance is lost, so I wrench my saber from its scabbard. Hand-to-hand fighting rages all around me. I spot the cadet who has wounded me. He has retrieved his pike, and now his eyes lock on mine.

Honor dictates that I engage him, offer him a clean chance to finish me, if I cannot kill him instead. But my legs are wobbly, and a dead weariness drags on my sword arm.

As he hunches his shoulders and advances, I turn in a panic and run.

Glancing in the mirror, I straighten to extend my height. I adjust the epaulettes at my shoulders, and touch Karina's white and purple scarf where it peeks out from behind my collar. The etched metal door swishes open. I turn nervously to enter.

The drawing room is elegantly furnished in satin, true-wood, and velvet. The bright light of candelabra shines on polished surfaces and on the living, drifting landscapes adorning the walls. But my gaze finds Karina, and fixes on her as I march stiffly across the chamber.

Her black hair is piled high on her head, curled and lacquered, revealing her ears and the duenna cell she wears dangling from one lobe. She is dressed in a flounced gown with low-cut bodice. Beneath the gown, a corset binds her tightly and pushes her breasts together. Her eyelids are painted yellow, to accent the amber eyelenses she wears. Her thick eyebrows have been plucked, high-arched curlicues penciled in their place.

I bow to her, and she offers me her gloved hand, which I am permitted to touch briefly with my fingertips.

"Maximilian." Her voice is low and controlled. "It's always nice to see you. Please sit." She gestures me to a chair across from her.

I adjust my saber before sitting down. It's always difficult to see Karina now. With the duenna monitoring, we must take care to preserve the formality of our meetings. At least on this occasion I have good news to discuss.

"Karina, I am happy to tell you that the seniors of our clan have approved my proposal. Assuming that I survive the surface wars, I am now entitled to claim you as my wife."

She smiles, and for a moment I see a glimmer of the old Karina behind the eyelenses and cosmetics. But then she catches herself and responds in a hushed voice.

"I am gladdened at your news, Maximilian. I look forward to the day you have completed your military duty and we can wed."

I swallow, trying hard to keep my emotions in hand. "It is what I've always wanted."

Karina stares down at her hands, clutched tightly in her lap. Her shoulders quiver, and after a moment I realize she is weeping.

My feelings carry me away. I throw myself on my knees before her. She grasps both my wrists, her white-gloved fingers digging into my sleeve.

"Maxy, I'm so afraid you'll be killed."

"I won't. I promise."

"How can you promise that?" Karina sobs.

Abruptly she clutches at her ear. The duenna has sensed her emotions rise past the permitted threshold and shot its deterrent signal to her auditory nerve. The effect, they say, is between a piercing whine and a toothache.

"You'll have to go," Karina cries.

The last thing I wish is to add to her pain. But as I struggle to my feet she grabs my sleeve.

"Maxy, forgive me."

"There's nothing to forgive."

"Go now." But she stops me again and kisses my hand. "Be safe!"

I hover a moment, wishing I could embrace her. Then I turn quickly and flee from her presence.

Bent over, one arm clutching my belly, I stagger through the outer fringes of the battle. A few of the enemy clansmen notice. Seeing that I am wounded, they do not attack. The rules of combat dictate they must leave me to the one who inflicted the wound.

I'm bleeding badly, and too weak to run much farther. The dark mouth of an alley lies ahead. I stumble to the black wall, wheel and look behind me.

The cadet stalks me through the street, moving with caution, watching his flanks against other attackers.

I stand at a parapet, staring down at the immense towers of the city. The lower portions of the towers are lost in a grimy mist that conceals the surface. A pink smudge of dawn colors one edge of the sky.

Bells toll behind me, monstrously loud. I whirl like a startled bird. It's only the day bells in the Cloister Tower. I've never heard them so close before.

Stepped terraces set with neat rows of planters rise upward toward the belfry. On a distant stair, a pair of black-robed clerics walk side by side, hands folded in their sleeves. Closer by, a door slips open and the white-clad figure of an acolyte appears. Head bowed inside his hood, he descends the steps with an unhurried stride and walks along the parapet toward me.

A few yards away he stops and pulls off his hood. It takes a moment more before I'm certain it is Hermann, as he disengages the terminals of a feedback helmet from his shaved skull.

Setting the apparatus aside, he speaks in a quiet tone. "Why have you come, Maximilian?"

I answer defensively, "I just wanted to see you."

Hermann's blank silence verifies that my coming here is an intrusion.

"I'm frightened, Hermann. Every time I go into battle, I'm frightened."

His mouth turns down at the corners. "That's common enough, surely."

"I don't mean ordinary fear. This is worse. I don't know if the cameras have noticed it yet, but I've begun to hold back in battle. I dread being killed, losing my chance to live, to marry Karina. I don't want to be a warrior anymore."

Hermann turns from me. "You shouldn't have come to me with this. It's unfair. We're not permitted to minister to our own families."

I feel he is right, I shouldn't burden him, but I can't help myself. I clamp a hand on his shoulder. "I don't need a cleric. I need you. We are still brothers, aren't we?"

The old wounds show in his eyes. "Yes, we are still brothers."

I lean on the parapet, gaze down on the shrouded city. "You said to me once that you weren't sure it all made sense, that we fight these wars, and kill each other. That you questioned whether it was really right."

"No. I said it wasn't right for me. Not that society shouldn't be this way."

"You said that you felt inside it was wrong. I just want to know what you feel now. The truth."

Herrman turns on me, his face bleached with anger. "The truth is this: the surface wars are necessary to satisfy the human males' instincts for aggression. Before the Global Mind, those instincts caused horrible destruction. Now they are rationally channeled and released without harm. And since the strongest and most skillful men survive to reproduce, our species as a whole benefits."

All he has done is paraphrase the official explanations we are taught from childhood. I turn away in disgust.

"What did you expect from me, Max? To claim that my adolescent doubts were wiser than the Global Mind? I'm not so presumptuous, as you seem to be." He pauses, then deliberately replaces the hood on his head. "Don't try to lay your cowardice at my feet. If you lack the nerve to fight, I suggest you discuss the matter with your commanders. Or you might go and speak with Rudy. Perhaps you can benefit from his example."

The saber is heavy in my hand, too heavy to carry any more. I stumble against the wall of the alley and land sprawling on the cold pavement. My enemy is not far behind, but I can run no farther. Desperate, I roll over and slide backward so I can prop my shoulders against the wall. With the last of my strength I lift the saber, then feel it sink.

Bursts of blackness erupt in my vision and all other sensations drain away.

Along the walls of the Communitarium are tall booths masked by heavy black curtains. A blinking pattern of dots on the floor leads me to the booth I am assigned. I pull the curtain aside and enter.

Before me is a blank wall, concave and sheathed in glass. When I sit down in the padded seat, the booth lights up and a voice asks me when I have come to visit.

"Rudy DeVries. Clan 647. Died 10/08/243."

The projector switches on and my brother Rudy appears. He looks exactly as I remember him from just before his death: square jaw, curly golden hair, bright and steady eyes. He sits in a comfortable chair, wearing his uniform and saber. He smiles at me.

"Hello, Maximilian. Good of you to come and see me."

"My commander ordered me to come," I blurt out the confession. "I have been reprimanded for cowardice."

The enkolon of my brother gives in surprise. "I am concerned to hear that, Max. I know you are no coward. What is the explanation?"

"I have been unconscious in battle," I answer with a shrug. "I do not wish to be."

"Your commander did well to send you to me. You need to be reminded of the glorious afterlife that awaits you if you die with honor."

"I care nothing for that. I only want this life. To live in peace, to marry."

"Oh, yes. Your attachment to Irde Kihna is under standable. Max. She is a fine young woman. But you

must realize that a second reprimand will jeopardize your chances of ever marrying."

"Yes."

"Besides, once you've crossed over to this side, and experienced the life of the Elect, you'll realize how unimportant all that was. Just as the games we played as children seem paltry and insignificant to adults."

I stare at the projector lights, just visible through the body of the enkolon. "What is it like where you are, Rudy? I mean, what is it truly like?"

Rudy smiles kindly. "We are often asked that question, and yet it's so difficult to express. All you have been taught about it is true, Max. We can construct whatever sensual realities we wish to dwell in. We can access and learn from data stored anywhere in the Global Mind. We can expand our awareness to encompass more and more consciousness. It is paradise, Max, just as we are taught."

And as we are taught. In that moment I see with an icy certainty that Rudy can tell me nothing more, because Rudy is no more. Whatever components of his mind survive in the stored data, the brother I knew died with his body. On the back of my neck, the skin is tingling.

"I see doubt on your face, Max. You must trust in what I tell you. The Global Mind has designed our society for the utmost happiness and well-being of mankind. How could it be otherwise, created by a perfected intelligence? You must accept the logic of that. You must believe it."

I must be careful what I say. For I realize now that it is not my departed brother who hears me, but the Global Mind itself, that listens.

My gaze drops to the floor. "I do believe it, of course. I suppose I have let fear get the better of me. I will do better, Rudy. I promise you I will."

I will do better to hide my fear in battle, to make the greatest show of bravery while taking the minimum risk. I will do whatever I can to preserve my life, the only life I ever expect to have.

Blackness. Pain crushing my chest. Blood in my mouth. Gasping, I cannot breathe. Cannot open my eyes.

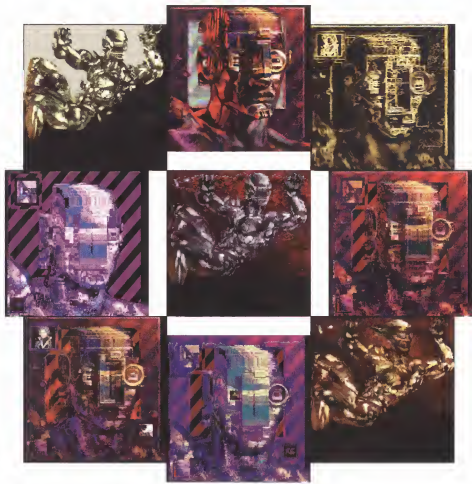
After some unknowable stretch of time, I realize my eyes are open, staring up at the towers and the darkening sky. Slowly, with a grueling effort, I sit up and pull the recorder wires from my head.

The corpse of Maximilian DeVries lies beside me, eyes gazing upward, lips pulled back over bloodied teeth. I curse him for the doubts he has driven into me, and for the fear that runs from those doubts as his blood still runs from his belly.

I hear the motors of the bearer units out on the boulevard. Soon one will track us down and collect the corpse and the neural recordings. In an hour I will be back in the barracks. My comrades will fill my glass and salute me for my first kill. As is the custom, I will then drink a toast to the hero I have sent to join the Elect.

Perhaps by then the doubts will be forgotten. But for now I am alone with his body, in the gathering darkness of the surface, and the cold wind is blowing. *

Art from the Digitally Assembled Mind



Rick Berry

When Kim and I were discussing what I might do for the cover (on and off over the course of several months) I must have bent his ear quite a bit about how wonderful digital work is. Then he stuck it to me by asking me to write down some of the things I'd been saying to him. This is his fault.

When I first began painting covers, though I didn't have any formal training, I'd always hated the term "self-taught." That seemed an absur-

dity. There are so many people that one owes in art: from historic influences so intense that it feels like collaboration, to actual living breathing collaboration with peers. My first digital image was done in a panic from which only collaboration could rescue me. Due to a fabulous boast made while I was slightly toasted on champagne (so was everybody else), I landed the digital revamp for the cover of William Gibson's splendid novel, *Neuromancer*. This would be

the first digital cover for trade fiction in the world. Since I had no computer and had not done any digital art, despite the wonderful claim I'd made to the contrary, it seemed that I might require *Help*.

Help is one of the fundamental components of collaboration. *Homo Sapiens'* highly developed ability to ask for and give help is the species' great distinction: it expresses everything worthwhile about us—intelligence, problem-solving, flexibility in

concert, etc. This is perhaps not exactly the argument I used when persuading a young hacker (Mike Halle of the Architecture Machine Group) at MIT's Media Lab to let me in and work some basic transformations on my paintings—I'm sure I was much more frank in my pleading. Victor Salvucci did the same for me at MassArt's lab. These guys had *knowledge* of something that *changed* my art into something new. I'm sure they thought they had done nothing special; we scanned and false color-mapped a red chalk drawing of mine, and—voilà!—the cover came into being. I took the fee from the job and bought a computer.

Learning art the way I did revealed that art is *always* a meeting ground of minds. Art seems to be a special showcase for the very subject of *mind*. One can easily argue that mind is a social construction; that without society, there is no mind. As a quick reverse proof, one might employ a sort of "thought experiment," something that goes like this: You take a new brain and put it in a black box, keep it alive in there for twenty-odd years, then take it out and hook it up—and what you've got is not much of a mind. All of our intellectual properties enjoy a substrate of something created and defined in society. You write a novel in a language not invented by you; you paint a picture in the awareness that it is a picture, a concept owned by no one, and so on for all of the arts and sciences—the whole gig is innately collaborative.

What if one elevated this collaborative synergy to a conscious endeavor? How quickly might one learn then? An artist never lacks opportunities for solo work—that is to say, work done without the hand or active regard of someone else involved—but chances for active collaboration with peers (as opposed to "reiffing" off art history from a bunch of dead guys who can't shoot back) are rare.

It's also risky. I like risky. Brand-new things occur in a mental chem-

istry that, from the outset and by definition, *must* include the potential to *transcend one's own perspective, because yours is not the only perspective involved*. You grow quickly this way. After all, you're only wasting surfaces—and possibly a really promising picture or two along the way. That *can* be painful. One or the other player tries some move, and a promising work nosedives. It's not that you aren't capable of ruining a good idea all by yourself, but *two* people standing there being disappointed can be pressurizing. Discouraging. I mean the *removal* of courage. Can't have that. You won't be able to move forward. If art ain't got courage, it ain't art. You can brave this out, and you'll get better with practice (as does the peership), but it can be rough. (It also can be funny; if the artists constantly try to make a piece more stupid with every new stroke, a "dumb art" fest dissolves everything into laughter.) There is another way.

What fixative, tracing paper and erasers were to fear, copying and bread dough (the medieval eraser, ugh), digital "save," "save as," and "undo" are to fix, trace... etc., in even greater magnitude. "Save as" on the computer means "save as something distinct from the previous file"; creating a new picture path without destroying the old one. Every splitting off, turning or branching in a work can be followed up separately. What I like least about a finished traditional painting is that it is *finished*—some final choice has been made, and that's it. All of its potential turns, curious accidents of vision, and so on seem foreclosed upon by this final choice. In digital work, all this potential is not refined out by finishing a piece, or worse, going down the wrong path with it. This also tends to make one bolder and more prolific. You're just not as hesitant about finding out about this and that in your imaging. This is because you can always take back a goof and/or you don't have to settle for one end result and one painting

—you can have a couple, or however many paintings as there are different ways this given piece might turn. This does mean more pictures—so who's complaining?

Further, in digital work, the exciting step of letting someone else wildass ideas around with you becomes relatively painless. You can afford to jointly explore visual terrain that is *extraperspective* (outside your own) in an active and dynamic way. Digital is the most motile of mediums. The greater the motility, the more accepting of changes, such as the crossdraft of new ideas. Working in this medium has allowed me to bat images back and forth with other artists (for instance, Darrel Anderson has a hand in the present cover). The tremendous advantage in being able to try out a notion, one that hovers electronically in a buffer somewhere, without messing with the source image (the last saved image) is very liberating. It'll still take guts and trust in your peers, but at least there'll be no more promising pieces going south. One of your biggest worries may actually be how much better (than you imagined) the picture winds up being. Your chum's input can make the piece so completely novel and arresting that you begin to question the weight of your own contribution. However, with a little communication between you, you may find out you're not alone in feeling this. This is good for you. You learn how to learn, by putting certain counterproductive attitudes aside.

That last bit doesn't sound so much like just doing art any more, does it? Well, yes and no. Art is a demanding practice, and if you get good, it's as powerful as dynamite—be careful how you use it. As I said earlier, art's also a product of mind, and mind is assembled in a societal context. It shouldn't really come as a surprise that the sincere practice of vision or art would lead back to such matters as people—which can be pretty satisfying. ♦

The Moons of Barsoom

Stephen L. Gillett

Everybody *knows* that Phobos and Deimos are what an asteroid looks like. Heck, they're probably captured asteroids themselves. So even though (till *very* recently) we'd never seen a real asteroid close up, we could always use the Viking photos of the Martian moons as models.

This is conventional wisdom that—like so much conventional wisdom—is at least questionable, if not downright wrong. It's not clear that Phobos and Deimos are anything at all like regular asteroids.

For one thing, Phobos and Deimos may merely be the last survivors of a horde of small Martian satellites. All their siblings may have since crashed into the Martian surface as their orbits decayed.

This notion stems from an observation Pete Schultz and Anne Lutz-Garihan at Brown University made several years ago. They found there are lots of elongate impact craters on Mars—around 170, in fact, an unusually high number. You'd expect an elongate crater to be formed by an oblique impact, and you'd be right—with a twist: it was made by a very oblique impact indeed. Impact craters tend to be almost perfectly round, even for impact angles quite far from the vertical, because so much energy is released at the impact it tends to swamp any asymmetries. A clearly elongate crater, then, was made by an object coming in nearly tangentially—a grazing impact.

So, over Mars's history a bunch of objects have come nearly tangentially

into the planet, sliding into its surface like a runner into third base. Brown and Lutz-Garihan suggest that these objects were a swarm of lost Martian satellites. As their orbits slowly decayed over geologic time, due to tidal effects, they crashed obliquely into the surface, one by one. In fact, Phobos's orbit is also decaying, and it will contribute yet another elongate crater in another 50 million years or so. (Phobos's orbit is decaying so fast that an astronomer once speculated it's hollow, a giant spacecraft left by a lost Martian civilization, but nothing so exotic is necessary!)

The elongate craters also tend to line up. This also suggests they were formed by satellites, since any small, close-in satellites will tend to lie in the same orbital plane—the plane of the planet's equator. So they'll tend to crash along the equator. Even if the satellites start out in very different orbits, tidal effects from the planet's equatorial bulge will quickly (geologically speaking!) shift the orbits into the equatorial plane. The tides tend to circularize the orbits, too, so even if they start out very elliptical, they get more circular over time.

(By the way, many of the older elongate craters do *not* lie along Mars's present equator. Schultz and Lutz-Garihan, therefore, suggest that Mars's crust has shifted with respect to its poles at times in the distant past. Similar large shifts of Earth's crust have been proposed, but they're extremely controversial. Don't confuse this with the drifting of Earth's indi-

vidual tectonic plates, which is well documented: we're talking about a shift of the crust *as a whole* with respect to the rest of the planet.)

Anyway, this horde of satellites may not even have been captured asteroids, either. Mars's satellite family may have had a lot more to do with Mars itself. Perhaps they were pieces broken out of it, such as by a huge impact late in Mars's formation. (As many of you will already know, this is similar to a scenario that's now popular for our own Moon's formation.) Or maybe they're just leftovers left behind in orbit, fragments that never quite got accreted.

In fact, even if Mars's satellites *did* start out as captured asteroids, they're probably quite different now, because they've been associated with Mars for a *long* time. This is because they would have had to have been captured back when Mars was forming, when it (presumably) had a thick proto-atmosphere that could slow down a passing asteroid. For a body like Mars to capture something gravitationally, you need a lot of friction to slow the something down so it can stay captured, even if it passes close enough to the planet. The usual mechanism for slowing down a proto-satellite is a very dense, extensive proto-atmosphere. The satellite-to-be dives through this atmosphere and is slowed down by aerodynamic drag. Any such atmosphere was blown away very early in Solar System history, once the Sun's nuclear fires ignited. (In fact, an early, violent

phase of the Sun, called the T-Tau phase, probably baked out the inner System pretty thoroughly.)

Phobos and Deimos also used to be proposed as refueling stops for Mars expeditions, because they look like carbonaceous chondrites, a type of meteorite that's relatively water-rich. How do they look like carbonaceous chondrites? In two (pretty so perfect) ways: they're dark, and they have low density.

Carbonaceous chondrites are dark because they contain lots of (yes?) carbon, some in the form of soluble organic compounds. Of course, lots of other things are dark, too: iron minerals, for example, tend to be almost black, and iron is a very common element. You can tell the difference between a carbon-rich object and an iron-rich object by detailed spectral reflectance—but such detailed data, especially on a dark object, is difficult to get.

Carbonaceous chondrites also have low density because of the water and organics they contain. But again, low density can come about in other ways—as we'll see.

But before we go into that, why did people get all excited about a possibly carbonaceous chondrite composition in the first place? Because lack of a convenient water supply is one of the biggest problems with space development in the inner Solar System. Water would be ideal not just for industrial processing—and, of course, for life support—but also for fuel: it could be electrolyzed into hydrogen and oxygen, or used directly for propellant in a nuclear rocket.

So, it seemed that Phobos might make a dandy refueling stop—not just for Mars missions, but for other inner System missions as well.

Also, the Soviet Phobos probe in 1989 (just before it quit working, showed that the surface of Phobos is completely dry. Water, and in fact any compounds containing hydrogen chemically bonded to oxygen, have a distinctive spectroscopic "signature." The C-H combination has a fundamental vibration, affectionately called the "O-H stretch," which produces a wavelength out in the infrared region of the spectrum. Ours around 2.75

micrometers—millinths of a meter. By contrast, visible light falls in the range 0.4 to 0.7 micrometers.) So, if there's enough O-H-bearing material on a planet's surface, you can see absorption at that wavelength in light reflected from the surface. (Looking for the C-H stretch doesn't work well from Earth's surface, because there's so much water in our atmosphere. The absorption from the water molecules in the air swamps any signal from a more distant object.)

So here's the bottom line: Phobos (the probe, not the satellite) found nothing, no C-H signature at all.

So much for Phobos's similarities to carbonaceous chondrites: it's a good thing we didn't blithely send a Mars expedition and just expect them to refuel at Phobos! (As some enthusiasts had been suggesting.)

Of course, people point out that it could merely be the surface of Phobos that's dry. Maybe it's baked out on top, but there's still water underneath. But I'm not arguing up for any expedition—at least an expedition that's counting on Phobos water—until we get some more definitive results first!

Because Phobos (and Deimos too) could be dry clear through. Again, they have low densities—as we saw, that's one reason people originally thought they were like carbonaceous chondrites. But the low density could have a very different explanation: they could be full of holes instead. In fact, they could be thoroughly broken up, with rockpiles traveling in formation through space.

That's another way these little moons are not like typical asteroids, even if they started out as captured asteroids *cos* ago. Their very orbits, so near Mars, keep Phobos and Deimos from being dispersed, even if they've been pervasively shattered.

For consider what happens if either moon is completely shattered by a large meteorite. The fragments disperse, but down there deep in Mars's gravity well, they don't disperse very far. In fact, most all the fragments end up in pretty much the same orbit they were in to begin with, and before long they're swept back together in a single object.

Gene Shoemaker and Ruth Wolfe, both at the US Geological Survey, noted this back in the early 1980s. The timescale is also very short: one estimate puts a typical reaccumulation time for Deimos as only 10,000 years—a geological eyeshink! And it's a mere 10 years for Phobos!

Of course, such continual breaking up and reforming is also a good way to bake the moons out completely over geologic time. Just as when you stir eggs frying in a skillet, so that they all get a chance to be exposed to the heat, every piece of Phobos and Deimos sooner or later gets its chance to lie under the baking Sun. Which is why I'd give good odds they're dry all the way through.

Still, we need a better look—preferably with actual samples, to be sure. And we also had a first look at a real live asteroid with the space probe Galileo's views of Gaspra in the fall of 1991. Superficially Gaspra looks like a Martian moon: it has craters, and also a dusty, regolithy surface of undetermined depth that must result from bombardment by small meteoroids. At second glance, though, Gaspra's quite different: it's much more angular. It looks more like a shard, a broken stone, than a potato.

That's just what we'd expect from the arguments I went through above: Gaspra probably is a piece that was chipped off a planetesimal at some point—and, unlike a Minotaur moon, once it's busted up, the debris won't gather back together. In fact, you can show that over the history of the Solar System most asteroids will have collided with something about their size at one point or another, and so must will be pretty thoroughly broken up—and the pieces thoroughly dispersed.

Martian moons as baked-out rockpiles, the bulwarks of asteroids, and asteroids as mega-shards: all this, of course, just shows we have to do a lot more exploration of the Solar System, especially when we start talking about things like bases on other planets and space colonies. ♦

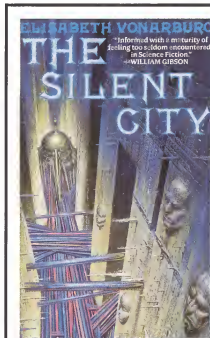
New Threads in the Tapestry

Pamela Sargent

"The waltz of the labels" is what a character in Elisabeth Vonarburg's marvelous new novel *In the Mothers' Land* calls it: our desire to make a specific term encompass the subject under discussion. Pick the right label, and presumably others will know exactly what you mean. As Antonë, this particular character in Vonarburg's novel, says in a letter to a friend about the community in which she finds herself: "I'd call them pragmatic Traditionalistas, somewhere between Believras and Progressistas." People, of course, have a propensity for being a lot more complex than any of the labels attached to them, as do books. This doesn't prevent most of us from using such handy tags.

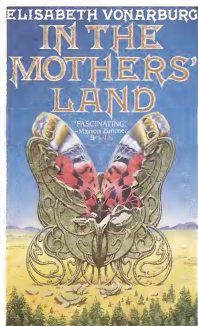
The labels attached to the varieties of fantastic fiction have multiplied in recent years, becoming narrower and more specific without necessarily being more accurate or illuminating. Once, the designations "science fiction," "fantasy," and "horror" were enough to do the job, and still there were writers (and readers) who found even those terms constricting. Now, in addition to the standard terms "space opera," "utopia," and "high fantasy," we have acquired such labels as "dark fantasy," "modern fantasy," "cyberpunk," "technothriller," "magic realism," "science fantasy," "splatterpunk," and other designations, many of which have hardened into marketing categories.

This kind of thing can be useful;



The Silent City by Elisabeth Vonarburg. Bantam Spectra Special Editions, August 1992, 261 pages, \$4.99. Translated from the French by Jane Brierley.

it gives us a way of knowing what we're talking about, doesn't it? Except that we can easily disagree about what a particular term means or where a specific work belongs. Millions of words have been wasted by writers, readers, and critics trying to decide whether various books or stories *truly* belong under one label or another, as if the labels are a se-



In the Mothers' Land by Elisabeth Vonarburg. Bantam Spectra Special Editions, December 1992, 400 pages, \$5.99. Translated from the French by Jane Brierley.

ries of Procrustean beds on which each work must be forced to lie until it fits—or until the work can be deformed enough by critical analysis to make it fit. Maybe we don't really know what we're talking about after all.

Unfortunately, these difficulties haven't stopped publishers, and their conglomerate overseers, from

packaging their products in ways that, in effect, slap a label on a book whether that label is appropriate or not. God forbid that any reader should pick up a book without a pretty good idea of what he's getting! Reading a novel has become, for many, not a prism of discovery, or a journey into unknown territory, but a way of revisiting the city and familiar. Should the contents fail to fulfill expectations, and be full of wonderful surprises instead, such readers are likely to be angry or disappointed instead of curious and intrigued by the stories they hold in their hands. Books—the good ones, anyway, the ones that aren't yet another piece of franchise fiction or the latest installment of yet another interminable series (here, the labels on the books may be an accurate reflection of what's inside), have a way of slipping out of the Postmodern beds of categories.

Elisabeth Vonarburg is one of those inventive and thoughtful writers who cannot easily be categorized, a fact her American publisher, Bantam Spectra, seems to have understood. Her first novel, *The Silver City*, and her second, *In the Mothers' Land*, are Spectra Special Editions, a line of books which, according to its jacket copy, is "dedicated to original works by today's most visionary writers: ambitious imaginative fiction representative of the finest writing in any genre." This sort of labeling is definitely preferable to most, even if one can feel sorrow at a publisher's marketing of ambitious, original, and literary books as yet another commercial category. And shouldn't all writing be imaginative and ambitious, even those works meant purely as entertainment? Elisabeth Vonarburg, happily, is a writer who lives up to her publisher's billing.

Vonarburg is a French-Canadian writer, which sets her apart from such Anglophone Canadian talents as Charles de Lint, Robert J. Sawyer and Andrew Weiner, to list only three among an ever-increasing number. As she has pointed out in a recent interview, despite her naive language, she is "not a French sci-ence fiction writer. In Canada, I'm beginning to get some recognition in

the English community. [But] some very vocal Quebecois writers don't consider me a Québécois writer—and they're right. I'm very curious to know how my [writing] will be received in America, because it is not American, either." ("Elisabeth Vonarburg: A World Apart," in *Locust*, September 1991, p. 5.) Her work has a seriousness of purpose that much American science fiction, even some of the best, lacks; moral issues and intellectual debates are an important (and exciting) part of her novels. Change may be necessary, but one has a sense, in Vonarburg's novels, of how problematic it is and how much pain it can cause. American writers, whatever their particular beliefs, seem more accustomed to change, taking it as a given. For Vonarburg's characters, change is won only with great difficulty, and with a fair amount of worrying along the way.

Any labels I might apply to Elisabeth Vonarburg's work would be no more than guideposts, but her writing can fairly be described as feminist. This is a term I use with some hesitation, because so many people nowadays have a mistaken assumption of what it means, always a danger with any label. (I was a victim of such misapprehensions myself a few years ago, when within the space of a few months, one reviewer was ready to dismiss a book of mine because I was described in its foreword as a "feminist," a term she apparently equated with "man-hater," while another soundly castigated me for not being feminist enough, and matters have not improved since then.) Between the ideologues and politically correct academics on the one hand (a member of this group has been lambasting me lately for what he sees as ideological fallacy), and those on the other who think it's both funny and accurate when Rush Limbaugh, the noted radio personality and right-wing windbag, refers to leaders of the women's movement as "teen-Nazis," one can feel like avoiding the term altogether. Perhaps it's time for those of us who have worn the feminist label proudly in the past to reclaim it.

In science fiction, feminist writing has fallen on hard times in recent

years. This may seem an odd assertion to make when there are more talented women writing in this genre than ever, but consider this: why haven't publishers—who are so anxious to label everything nowadays, come up with a category of feminist science fiction? Why do so many re-chew the label? (You know the people I mean, the ones who say "I'm not a feminist, but . . ." and then go on to offer what could be a virtual feminist manifesto.) Can it be that our battle has been won? But if that were the case, we wouldn't hear mutterings about whether women can actually write "real" science fiction. We might not notice that the science fiction that publishers seem to be aiming at a female audience, in its packaging anyway, often bears a close resemblance to romance novels. We might not hear stories from one writer or another of having to tone a strong story down, knowing it wouldn't be published otherwise.

It may be optimistic of me to see signs of change, within science fiction and outside, but such signs are there. So-called "women's issues" are once again a major part of the national debate. Inside the field, there is now a new prize, the James Tiptree, Jr. Award, which is given annually to works that explore and expand the roles of women and men. (It shouldn't be necessary to add, but probably is, that works by both women and men are considered for this award, since some have mistakenly assumed that it's an award for women only.) Maybe more writers and readers will come to see that the genres of science fiction and fantasy are an ideal place to examine our assumptions about gender roles and questions about what human societies might—or should—become.

Elisabeth Vonarburg is one of the writers imaginatively exploring such ideas. In *the Mothers' Land* is another strand in the tapestry of feminist science fiction that includes such novels as Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* (1975), Kate Wilhelm's *The Cleverest Test* (1976), Marge Piercy's *Woman on*

the Edge of Time (1976), Vonda N. McIntyre's *Dreamsnake* (1978), Sally Miller Gearhart's *The Wanderground* (1978), Joan Slonczewski's *A Door into Ocean* (1986), Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986), and Eleanor Arnason's *A Woman of the Iron People* (1991). Men should not feel excluded; I could easily add novels by John Varley and Samuel R. Delany to this list. If someone out there is thinking that these books and authors are a varied and diverse lot—well, that's part of the point. We should probably be grateful that feminist science fiction and fantasy never did become yet another rigid marketing category. To insist that such writing be a particular thing, with its own strictures and limits, is to contradict what feminism is supposed to be—not a rigid doctrine never to be questioned, but an ongoing inquiry with a variety of possible answers.

Elisabeth Vonarburg has embarked on such an imaginative inquiry with intelligence and art.

The Silent City, Vonarburg's first novel, was first published in French in 1981 by Éditions Denoël and in English in 1988 by a Canadian press, Porcépic Books. Set in a ruined Europe some hundreds of years from now, the novel is the story of Elisa, product of a biological experiment conducted inside an underground City. Few people have survived in this City, and none in other Cities. On the Outside, a land ravaged in the past by nuclear accidents, climatic changes, and environmental damage, survivors have banded together in tribes. Elisa, the first of a new race, with the ability to heal and rejuvenate herself, must leave the City to escape Paul, her increasingly insane mentor and lover, and find a way to aid those on the Outside.

This is familiar science-fictional territory, but in Vonarburg's hands, it is transformed into a strange landscape with its share of surprises. The few human inhabitants of the City live much of their lives electronically wired to ommachs, humanoid robotic bodies stronger than their own. Only gradually, as Elisa grows up, does she realize that the City is in

fact deserted, that she has only imagined that there are people on other levels. When she leaves the City, she is aided by a computer simulation of Richard Desprats, the man she has known as her grandfather and who has died some years earlier.

Desprats reveals to Elisa that she has the ability to alter her body completely, that she has in fact undergone metamorphosis in the past without realizing it. To leave the City, she must become a man, since life for a woman on the Outside is even harder than for men. Amid the ruins, bands of people dominated by men must struggle to survive; women are little more than slaves. An additional problem for these tribes is the existence of a virus that causes many more females than males to be born. Desprats, in the body of an ommach, and Elisa, transformed into a young man named Hanse, flee from the City.

Elisa and Desprats must shut down the other Cities while keeping themselves hidden from Paul's surveillance. This might have made for a fairly straightforward story, but the struggle with Paul is only one part of the novel. Elisa must also create the new race that will spread her genes, thus bringing into existence others who have her ability to heal, and it is a mark of Vonarburg's thoughtfulness that Elisa struggles with the ethics of such a project. During the course of the novel, Elisa encounters a clan of survivors involved in their own battle with Paul and the City, confronts her former mentor, rears the children she creates inside the City's laboratories, and becomes involved in a conflict caused partly by her own actions years earlier.

Appropriately, for a novel whose theme is change and metamorphosis, the narrative can seem to be one kind of tale before abruptly turning into something quite different. The story of a child growing up in a dying civilization becomes an effort to solve a mystery; Elisa, exploring her sexual desires as a male for the first time on the Outside, suddenly finds herself confronting Paul and realizes that he is still controlling some of her actions. A story of children com-

ing of age and growing more aware of their purpose becomes an ethical debate and then a story of rebellion. Toward the end of the novel, young Abram resists his mother Elisa's plans for him, while a group of women who have banded together against the men who have oppressed them prepare for battle. Elisa, having come to certain conclusions at various points in the story, is often forced to revise them, thus casting earlier events in a different light. Vonarburg entices, intrigues, and startles the reader throughout these various metamorphoses, but never loses control of her story.

One distinctive quality of Vonarburg's is the sensual quality of many of her scenes. If occasionally the background in this, her first novel, seems sketchy, she more than makes up for that with details that envelop the reader. This is a novel with tastes, smells, vivid confrontations and characterizations that convince.

Not surprisingly, in a book where the central character functions as both a man and a woman, gender and the role it plays in the social order is an important subject. Elisa comes to think of her children as boys, even though they are born as girls and grow up alternating between the female and male form, because they will have to remain males once they leave her in order to distribute their genes more widely. Elisa herself, despite her ability to transform herself, remains a woman throughout much of the novel and seems more a mother to her children than a father—although in fact she is both. Some of her children develop a preference for one gender or another when they reach adolescence. Vonarburg conveys the impression that gender identity, although malleable, cannot be shed quite as easily as we might wish.

The Silent City ends somewhat inconclusively, which is entirely appropriate to the material. Elisa, after all, has no way of knowing what her actions, and those of her children, will produce in the future, but the book concludes on a note of hope. This elegantly written first novel will inevitably be called "promising" by some reviewers, a problematic term

since it implies that the reviewer is waiting for the novelist to do even better. Fortunately Vonarburg, who has already done more in her first novel than some writers in this genre ever achieve, more than fulfills her promise in her second.

The author has called *In the Mothers' Land* a "non-sequel" to *The Silent City*. Each book will illuminate facets of the other, but each can also be read independently (I read the first book after finishing the second one). Both novels share the same background, but *In the Mothers' Land* takes place in Elisa's ruined Europe some five hundred years later, and much has changed. In the territory now known as Maerlande, Families composed largely of women live in the various provinces of Maerlande—Escarra, Baltike, Bretanye, and Litale. To the east lie the Badlands, still so polluted that, it is thought, no one can survive there.

The story begins with the earliest memories of Lisbei, the protagonist of the novel, a girl growing up in the region of Litale known as Bethely. "Before Maerlande," as Lisbei writes in her journal as a child, when she is first learning about her world's history, "there were the *Hives*. Before . . . the Hives, there were the *Harems*. There was something else before that, but it was a long, long time ago and anyhow it wasn't at all good, worse even than the Harems and Hives, and there isn't much left . . . so we can't tell what it was really like." The Harems, as one might guess, were communities dominated by men but made up largely of women, while the Hives were structured much like insect societies, each with a woman known as the Queen as its leader. The communities of Maerlande have given up the violence of their Hive predecessors and follow the peaceful teachings of one they call Garde, the Daughter of Elli.

One of the delights of this novel is that the reader learns about Lisbei's world in much the way she does, first discovering her immediate environment and then, gradually, the world beyond it. Her questions in the beginning, and the tentative conclusions she draws, are those a child

might have; her environment is mysterious and elusive, with the truth about various events just out of reach of this curious girl. The pattern of her world, the way in which life comes into being, is "the Tapestry of Elli." As Lisbei and the other children are told by Moorei, one of their "gardianas":

"Elli knits the world at one end, and *at the same time* Elli unravels it at the other . . . Elli doesn't always knit the same thing, naturally. It would be too boring. Elli changes the color of the thread, or the kind of stitch or the number of stitches and in this way Elli is always pleased with Elli's knitting because it's always new . . . It's never-ending, do you see? We constantly come from Elli and return to Elli."

In the Mother's Land is itself a complex tapestry woven of different threads. We move from Lisbei's experiences, and her later recollections of some of them, to extracts from her journal at different times in her life, letters written by other characters in the novel, and observations seemingly made by an unseen narrator looking back at the events of Lisbei's life.

The provinces of Maerlande differ from one another in language, certain details of their customs, and prevailing attitudes. Some communities are more resistant to change, while others are considered progressive, but all have certain features in common. The biological facts of their world, in which genetic damage affects many, the average life span is not much past middle age, females greatly outnumber males, and mutations crop up often, dominate their lives.

The head of each Family is the Mother, also known as the Capta. It is she who, in consultation with her Memories (women who function as historians) and others she might choose, such as Medicinas and her Compagna (a sexual partner and close friend), makes decisions for her Family, although issues involving all of Maerlande are brought to the Assembly of Mothers. Men have

no say in the affairs of Maerlande, and receive little of the education women get; they are valued largely for reproductive purposes. They must, if they are fertile, enter the Service, in which they will be sent from one community to another to contribute their sperm to compatible genetic lines.

Women who are sterile, whose children do not survive birth, or who are past their reproductive years become Blues; men who cannot reproduce are also known as Blues. Another fact of life in Maerlande is that many women and men are unable to reproduce at all. Red women, those who are fertile, must give birth to as many children as possible before being declared Blue. (Some communities will declare a woman Blue after only two or three births of infants who do not survive, while the most conservative will force her to remain Red.) These women are impregnated by artificial insemination, using the sperm of whichever man is in residence as the Mother's Male at the time. The exception is the Mother of a Family; she must have sexual intercourse at regular intervals with the Male, and engage in a religious rite with him known as the Dance of the Pairing. Red women are honored for their ability to bear children, and the Mother is the most respected of all; those girls who never menstruate and are declared Blue at the age of sixteen are understandably deeply disappointed. Yet the Reds risk pain and death with every pregnancy, as well as the sorrow of often losing the children they bear, and are necessarily more restricted in their lives than the Blues, who are freer to travel and follow various professions.

In Lisbei's community of Bethely, the children, called "mostas," do not even have the status of real people until they have survived eight years, and their mothers have little to do with rearing their own children. It is, for them, too painful to come to love their small children when the probability is that most of them will die before the age of eight. But there are some signs of hope. The population of Maerlande has increased enough that an expedition is being

planned to the lands across the Western Ocean, lands that might be empty and ready to be settled. More children are surviving the illness called the Malady, which kills most of those who are afflicted, but leaves the survivors immune to other illnesses and able to heal their injuries more quickly than others.

The novel covers nearly the entire span of Lisbei's life, during which her society's most cherished assumptions about its past and Lisbei's own unquestioned suppositions about herself and those around her are challenged. The oldest living daughter of Selva, the Mother of Bethely, she grows up being given a Mother's education, since she has been designated as Selva's successor. Lisbei's life, however, soon takes a different path from the one she had expected, when a discovery she makes threatens her society's most fervently held beliefs. The course of Lisbei's life takes her to other Maerlande communities and eventually to the edges of the Badlands. Throughout her journeys and her intellectual explorations, we travel in a constantly intriguing world which is often surprising in its differences from ours, yet oddly familiar in its underlying biological and social patterns. Vonarburg, in showing that Lisbei's world and the people she encounters are not always what they seem, makes us see our own world differently.

Vonarburg has a gift for presenting startling revelations throughout her story that, upon reflection, seem completely logical as well. She always plays fair with the reader; there is nothing arbitrary about any of the twists and turns of events. Lisbei's beloved sister Tula; the mysterious explorer Kelys; Dougall, an intellectually curious and ultimately ill-fated young man; Guiseia, the skeptical Mother of Angresea; and Guiseia's twin brother Toller, who attempts to educate Lisbei about the painful realities of men's lives, are only a few of the memorable and often surprising characters who populate this book, many of them people who try to look beyond the limits they face. At the novel's conclusion, when a final revelation throws everything that has happened into a different perspective, I wanted to read *In the Mothers' Land* again, knowing that many of the scenes and details would take on added significance; the book would, in a sense, be a different novel. This is a story that rewards rereading; in fact, it almost demands it.

Jane Brierley, the translator of both novels, does an excellent job of presenting a literate and authentically different voice; her translations manage to convey Vonarburg's emotionally charged yet elegant style. One particular challenge she faced with *In the Mothers' Land*, since in

Lisbei's language of Litali feminine terms predominate, was devising female endings for various nouns (a problem that doesn't exist in French) that wouldn't seem obtrusive or jarring in English; here, for the most part, she succeeds.

Elisabeth Vonarburg, in the interview mentioned earlier, called *In the Mothers' Land* "a novel of education," and it is, as well as being an intricate and layered work of art comparable, with its atmospheric future cut off from the past and the author's penchant for the surprising yet strangely familiar detail, to Gene Wolfe's *Book of the New Sun*. But the novel is also a story with the appeal of an elaborate, suspenseful saga such as Frank Herbert's *Dune* (in its own way, a *bildungsroman* and novel of education). Readers seeking intelligent entertainment will find it in this book. Those who are looking for more, for science fiction rooted in realistic speculation rather than arbitrary assumptions, for characters as interesting and idiosyncratic as real people, and for a novel that is thoughtfully original instead of ostentatiously flashy, will be amply rewarded by *In the Mothers' Land*. Elisabeth Vonarburg has succeeded in creating a memorable addition to the body of sociological science fiction in what is only her second novel, leaving this reader eagerly anticipating what she will do next. ♦

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Tomorrow's Books

December 1992 Releases



Compiled by Susan C. Stone
and Bill Fawcett

Piers Anthony: *Fractal Mode, Ace Fantasy*, first time in pb, 336 pp, \$5.99. Book 2 of the Mode series. Five special people are needed as anchor points for a path across parallel universes, and when one of the five is lost, the others must help their new fifth fulfill a dangerous prophecy.

Gillian Bradshaw: *Kingdom of Summer*, Bantam Spectra Fantasy, first time in pb, 288 pp, \$4.99. In this sequel to *Hawk of May*, Lord Gwalchmai, now King Arthur's most valued warrior of the Light, wages war against his mother Morgawse's malignant evil.

Orson Scott Card: *Cruel Miracles*, Tor SF, first time in pb, 288 pp, \$4.99. The third volume of short stories broken out of Card's novel *Maps in a Mirror*.

Michael Cecilione: *The Deathscape*, Diamond Horror, pb orig, 288 pp, \$4.99. With the help of a stubborn intern, Laura Kane cheated death, but something she calls Croaker came back with her and is leaving a trail of terror and destruction in his rage.

Jack L. Chalker: *The Birth of Flux and Anchor*, Tor SF, pb reiss, 384 pp, \$3.99. The fourth novel in the Soul Rider series, set in a world divided between stable Anchor, and the Flux, where flesh is mutable and reality leads to insanity.

Tom De Haven: *The Last Human*, Bantam Spectra Contemporary Fan-

tasy, hc/tr pb orig, 256 pp, \$22.50/\$11.00. The final volume of *Chronicles of the King's Tramp*. In a treacherous labyrinth outside time, Jack finds his sword, his magic, and his knack for happy coincidences are all useless against his nemesis the Last Human.

Bradley Denton: *Buddy Holly Is Alive and Well on Ganymede*, AvoNova SF, first time in pb, 304 pp, \$4.50.

Oliver Vale was raised to believe in personal freedom, UFOs, and rock 'n' roll. Suddenly, everyone's TV has Buddy Holly on every channel—and when the broadcast from Ganymede says Oliver knows why, he must flee aliens, a CIA assassin, and a horde of angry couch potatoes.

Charles Dickens: *A Christmas Carol*, Bantam Classics, pb reiss, 112 pp, \$2.50. The classic Christmas tale of Scrooge and the ghosts of Christmas Past, Present, and Future.

Gordon R. Dickson: *The Last Dream*, Baen Fantasy, pb reiss, 288 pp, \$2.95. A collection filled with stories of dragons, water witches, were-creatures, a haunted village, and more.

Gordon R. Dickson: *Time Storm*, Baen SF, pb reiss, 432 pp, \$4.99. It seemed the world should have ended when waves of distorted time swept over Earth. But, after nearly all of humanity vanishes, a trio of mismatched survivors sets out to find what caused the storm and put a stop to it.

Carole Nelson Douglas: *Amberleigh*, Tor Historical Fiction, pb, \$4.99. In

this historical romantic suspense by a noted fantasy writer, Amberleigh Dunne must find the key to the lethal secrets haunting a great Irish estate in the 1890s.

Carole Nelson Douglas: *Seed Upon The Wind*, Tor Fantasy, hc, 320 pp, \$19.95. In the sequel to *Cup of Clay*, Alison rejoins Rowan in the strange parallel world of Veil to face a new quest in the battle of the four winds.

David Drake: *Ranks of Bronze*, Baen SF, pb reiss, 320 pp, \$3.50. Soldiers of ancient Rome were sold into slavery, bought by alien traders and sent out to fight in a galactic war. Now, after 2,000 years, they're coming home.

Rose Estes: *Elfwood*, Ace Fantasy, pb orig, 240 pp, \$4.99. The magical folk of Elfwood and the humans of the nearby castle live peacefully together, until the castle is threatened by human barbarians and savage Orcs. And, if the castle falls, so does all of Elfwood. . . .

Philip José Farmer: *Red Orc's Rage*, Tor SF, first time in pb, 288 pp, \$4.99. Fantasy and reality blend when Jim Grimson, an angry troubled young man, is placed in a mental hospital. Then his doctor sends him to the World of Tiers, where he becomes, for a time, the villainous Red Orc.

Kenneth C. Flint: *Legends Reborn*, Bantam Spectra Fantasy, pb orig, 368 pp, \$4.99. In this contemporary fantasy, Michael Kean, a real estate mogul developing a Celtic theme park in Ireland, meets an otherworldly young woman whose Sidhe protectors are determined

Key to Abbreviations

hc: hardcover, almost always an original publication.

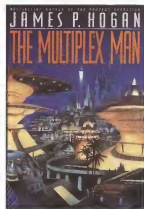
pb orig: paperback original, not published previously in any other format.

pb reiss: paperback reissue, designating a title that was previously published in paperback but has been out of print.

pb rep: paperback reprint, designating a title that was previously published

in hardcover or trade paperback (sometimes expressed as **first time in pb**).

tr pb: trade paperback, a format using pages larger than a paperback but generally smaller than a hardcover, with a flexible cover.



to save her from the dangers of New York . . . and him.

Karen Joy Fowler: *Artificial Things*, Bantam Spectra SF, pb reiss, 224 pp, \$4.99. A collection of 13 short stories, with a new foreword, by this Campbell Award winning author.

Mark Geston: *Mirror to the Sky*, AvoNova SF, hc, \$20.00. Aliens known to Earth as "gods" offer humanity a display of sculpture and paintings. But the works evoke intense responses, mass violence, and insanity. Amid chaos and collapse, humans and aliens grope toward understanding and galactic survival.

Thorarinn Gunnarsson: *Dragons on the Town*, Ace Fantasy, pb orig, 304 pp, \$4.99. The sequel to *Make Way for Dragons!* and *Humans Beware!* A comic adventure teaming a California ghost girl, a dragon, and Sherlock Holmes (living incognito in New York City) against an evil sorceress.

Laurell K. Hamilton: *Nightshade*, Pocket Books SF, pb orig, 288 pp, \$5.50. When an emergency calls the *Enterprise* away from delicate peace negotiations on a warring planet, Lt. Wolf must turn peacemaker to save Capt. Picard from accusations of murder, and determine the fate of an entire world. *ST: TNG* Book #24.

Robert A. Heinlein: *The Menace From Earth*, Baen SF, pb reiss, 288 pp, \$4.95. Heinlein creates a cast of unforgettable characters in these stories ranging from the unknown regions of the Earth, to the Moon, the planet Pluto, and beyond.

James P. Hogan: *The Multiplex Man*, Bantam SF, hc, 368 pp, \$20.00. A near-future thriller about a man who awakens in a new body, to find that his former life is not what it seemed—and that his new life is threatened by hired killers.

Dean Ing: *Systemic Shock*, Tor SF, pb reiss, \$4.99. A revised edition of the first book in the Quantrell trilogy, about one soldier's struggle for survival after World War III.

Charles Ingrid: *Path of Fire*, DAW SF, pb orig, 352 pp, \$4.99. An alien pilot, with the rare ability to navigate the Patterns of Chaos, links minds with a human pilot to avert a civil war. Book #2 in the Patterns of Chaos series.

Charles Ingrid: *Radius of Doubt*, DAW SF, pb reiss, \$4.99. An alien pilot, fighting the loss of his extraordinary power to navigate the Patterns of Chaos, seeks a forbidden experiment to renew his abilities . . . with the aid of a race that calls itself "human." Book #1 in the Patterns of Chaos series.

J. Robert King: *Heart of Midnight*, TSR Fantasy/Horror, pg orig, 320 pp, \$4.95. Casimir, cursed since birth with lycanthropy, finds himself called upon to embrace the powers of his dark nature to ward off his own murder and gain revenge on the father who made him a werewolf. The fourth book in an open-ended series of RAVENLOFT™ novels.

Rosemary Kirsten: *The Outskirts Secret*, Del Rey SF, pb orig, 304 pp, \$3.99. A Del Rey Discovery book. Sequel to *The Steerswoman*.

Dean Koontz: *Hideaway*, Berkley, first time in pb, 368 pp, \$5.99. Hatch Harrison was clinically dead after the accident . . . and he's grateful for his miraculous revival. Then he starts to see terrifying images of murder and madness and realizes he's brought something terrible back with him from the threshold of death.

Damon Knight: *Why Do Birds*, Tor SF, hc, 272 pp, \$18.95. Strangely, Ed Stone claims the aliens who have kept him in suspended animation since the 1930s have now sent him to warn hu-

manity to build a massive protective vault to save itself from the impending destruction of the Earth. Stranger yet, people believe him.

Katherine Kurtz: *King Javan's Year*, Del Rey Fantasy, hc, 496 pp, \$20.00. Volume II of *The Heirs of Saint Camber*. Deryni sympathizer Prince Javan fought and won against the power-hungry former Regents who conspired to supplant him. But, to wrest control of Gwynedd, the Regents would stop at nothing. . . .

Mercedes Lackey and Ellen Guon: *Knight of Ghosts and Shadows*, Baen Fantasy, pb reiss, 352 pp, \$4.99. When the desperate sadness of a young man's music frees an elfen noble from the magical prison that held him for centuries, the two raise an army to fight the evil lord who imprisoned the elf . . . and now seeks to conquer California.

Mercedes Lackey and Ellen Guon: *Summoned to Tournay*, Baen Fantasy, pb reiss, 304 pp, \$4.99. An elf lord and his human bard companion must summon the Nightflyers, soul-devouring shadow creatures from the dreaming world, to save San Francisco from doom.

Mercedes Lackey and Ellen Guon: *Wing Commander: Freedom Flight*, Baen SF, pb orig, 320 pp, \$4.99. The most disreputable gang of misfits who ever flew between the stars set out on a mission to free a world. Set in the background world created for the popular computer game *Wing Commander*.

Richard A. Lupoff: *Night of the Living Gator*, Ace SF, pb orig, 160 pp, \$4.50. After Melvige and his faithful dogoid companion enter a strange mall, they discover that Sdark the Loan Shark is after them, Loola the gypsy princess is missing, and space-age alligators are hot on their trail. Book 3 in Daniel M. Pinkwater's *Melvige of the Megaverse* series.



R. A. MacAvoy: *King of the Dead*, AvoNova Fantasy, first time in pb, 288 pp, \$4.50. This second volume of the *Lens of the World* Trilogy continues the tale of peace-loving philosopher Nazhuret, as he's forced to take up the task of protecting his beloved homeland against a fearsome neighboring kingdom—though it means confronting treachery, disaster and sorcery.

Rob Macgregor: *Indiana Jones and the Interior World*, Bantam Falcon, pb orig, 272 pp, \$4.99. Indy follows the unicorn horn through a gateway to the Interior World, where the horn has upset the balance between the worlds.

Anne McCaffrey: *All the Weyrs of Pern*, Del Rey SF, first time in pb, 448 pp, \$5.99. The latest volume in the popular *Dragonriders of Pern* series.

Michael Moorcock: *Stormbringer*, Ace Fantasy, pb reiss, 224 pp, \$4.50. Sixth volume of the epic *Ehrlic* saga.

Robert Morgan: *The Things That Are Not There*, Diamond Mystery, pb orig, 208 pp, \$3.99. First in a series of supernatural mysteries about a hard-boiled detective specializing in things that go bump in the night.

Edward Myers: *Fire and Ice*, Roc Fantasy, pb orig, 432 pp, \$4.99. Sequel to *The Mountain Made of Light*. Jesse O'Keefe found a lost tribe in the Peruvian Andes, and now finds himself in the middle of a tribal war that threatens to end their civilization.

Larry Niven, Jerry Pournelle and Michael Flynn: *Fallen Angels*, Baen SF, pb reiss, 400 pp, \$5.95. In 2073, when fanatical anti-technology policies have brought on a new ice age, two marooned astronauts, "Angels" nearly paralyzed by earth's gravity, are hunted across America's heartland as they seek a way back to their space home.

William F. Nolan and Martin H.

Greenberg, editors: *The Bradbury Chronicles: Stories in Honor of Ray Bradbury*, Roc SF, first time in pb, 336 pp, \$5.50. An anthology of 22 stories (including one by Bradbury himself) set in the worlds of Bradbury's imaginings, by writers who have been inspired by him.

Andre Norton: *Iron Cage*, Roc SF, pb reiss, 256 pp, \$4.50. Jonny, once a human prisoner of an alien race, comes to live with a gentle tribe of intelligent animals who teach him of camaraderie and security. Then a spaceship of humans shatters their peaceful lives and Jonny must defend his protectors from his own race.

Andre Norton: *Wraiths of Time*, Tor Fantasy, pb reiss, 256 pp, \$3.99. When a magical artifact, hurries archeologist Tallahasee Mitford back in time to Egypt's "darker sister" Nubian Meroe, she must impersonate the most powerful priestess in the kingdom to save it—and master magic to find her own way home.

Andre Norton with P. M. Griffin and Mary Schaub: *Flight of Vengeance*, Tor Fantasy, hc, 384 pp, \$21.95. This sequel to *Storms of Victory* explores the Turning, a massive, witch-powered disaster, and tells of a witch who couldn't find her powers until all others lost them.

Andre Norton and Grace Allen Hogarth: *Sneeze on Sunday*, Tor Mystery, first time in pb, 256 pp, \$4.99. A period mystery set in a sleepy New England town in the early 1950s.

Andre Norton and Mercedes Lackey: *The Elvenbane*, Tor Fantasy, first time in pb, 576 pp, \$4.99. Shana, who is the daughter of the elven tyrant Lord Dryan but was raised by a dragon shaman, explores her magical abilities and, aided by her dragon and elven brothers, leads a revolt against the decadent elves.

Jody Lynn Nye with Anne McCaffrey: *The Dragonlover's Guide to Pern*, Del Rey SF, tr pb rep, 192 pp, \$12.95. A lavishly illustrated and officially sanctioned guide to Anne McCaffrey's *Pern*.

Steve Perry: *Brother Death*, Ace SF, pb orig, 256 pp, \$4.99. Latest in the Matador series. When warned of their impending assassination, the wealthy elite of a planet enlist Bork, strongman of the Matadors, to protect them. Their enemy is a fanatical secret brotherhood, commanded by an assassin who challenges even Bork's strength.

Kevin Randle and Richard Driscoll: *Star Precinct 3: Inside Job*, Ace SF, pb orig, 192 pp, \$4.50. An elite unit of Star Cops must fight, within their own mammoth precinct ship, against both a lost subculture of humans addicted to a hellish synthetic drug... and a killer who preys on the addicts.

Mike Resnick and Martin H. Greenberg, editors: *Aladdin: Master of the Lamp*, DAW Fantasy, pb orig, 352 pp, \$4.99. An all-new collection of stories of Aladdin and his magical lamp, by such talented authors as Pat Cadigan, George Alec Effinger, David Gerrold, Katharine Kerr, Judith Tarr and Jane Yolen.

Jennifer Roberson: *A Tapestry of Lions*, DAW Fantasy, pb orig, 464 pp, \$5.99. Book 8 of the *Chronicles of the Cheysuli*. This dynastic fantasy concludes when, after generations of his people's striving toward recreating the magical race, the heir to the Homana's throne refuses his destined role in the Prophecy.

Jennifer Roberson: *Chronicles of the Cheysuli*, Books 1-7, DAW Fantasy, pb reiss. Republication of the entire series to tie in with the release of the final volume (described above). Book 1:



Shapechangers, 224 pp, \$3.99. Book 2: *The Song of Homana*, 352 pp, \$4.50. Book 3: *Legacy of the Sword*, 384 pp, \$3.95. Book 4: *Track of the White Wolf*, 376 pp, \$4.99. Book 5: *A Pride of Princes*, 456 pp, \$3.95. Book 6: *Daughter of the Lion*, 372 pp, \$3.95. Book 7: *Flight of the Raven*, 372 pp, \$4.99.

Fred Saberhagen: *An Old Friend of the Family*, Tor Horror, pb reiss, \$4.99. Saberhagen's original Dracula adventure. When a dread vampiress starts killing the Southerland family, they call on their old friend, Count Dracula.

Will Shetterly: *Elsewhere*, Tor Fantasy, pb, 256 pp, \$4.99. A novel in the Borderlands series. Set in an American city on the border between Faerie and the everyday world, where neither magic nor technology work all the time, humans and Trueblood elves clash over turf.

Julie Dean Smith: *The Sage of Sare*, Del Rey Fantasy, pb orig, 352 pp, \$4.99. Sequel to *Call of Madness and Mission of Magic*. In a world where the use of magic is persecuted, a renegead princess fights to preserve it. High fantasy in the style of Katherine Kurtz.

Created by Christopher Stasheff: *The Gods of War*, Baen Fantasy, pb orig, 304 pp, \$4.99. A new shared universe series introducing TEK: Lord of Battle, the latest militant deity struggling to make it to the top of the pantheon against the not-so-low-tech efforts of jealous older gods. Stories by B. W. Clough, Jody Lynn Nye, Mike Resnick, Susan Schwartz, and others.

Laura C. Stevenson: *The Island and the Ring*, AvoNova Fantasy, first time in pb, 288 pp, \$4.50. With her beloved homeland frozen in an unnatural winter, Tania, the daughter of the slain king, must risk everything to restore the promise of eternal summer.

Joan D. Vinge: *The Snow Queen*, Questar SF, pb reiss, \$5.50. Moon, a young mystic, must break a conspiracy that spans space, as she comes to realize she is the Snow Queen's lost weapon, lost rival . . . and lost soul.

Joan D. Vinge: *The Summer Queen*, Questar SF, first time in pb, 992 pp, \$5.99. In this sequel to *The Snow Queen*, Moon becomes the powerful Summer Queen of Tiamat, and realizes that, to save her universe, she will have to become a goddess.

Denise Vitola: *Half-Light*, TSR SF, pb orig, 320 pp, \$4.50. After her forced marriage to a powerful priest in order to save herself from a terminal disease, Commander Ariann Centuri discovers that there is a fine line between reality and the threats that menace her in the twilight plane of Half-Light.

Elisabeth Vonarburg (Translated by Jane Bricker): *In The Mother's Land*, Bantam Spectra SF, pb orig, 400 pp, \$5.99. A Spectra Special Edition. Sequel to *The Silent City*, set 800 years later. When Lisbei of Bethely contracts the Malady and awakens changed, she sets out to transfigure her world.

David Weber: *Path of the Fury*, Baen SF, pb orig, 432 pp, \$4.99. When the planet-wrecking pirates raided ex-commando leader Alicia DeVries' quiet homeworld, murdered her family, and left her for dead, they made a big mistake. Alicia lived, turned "pirate" herself, and stole a cutting-edge AI ship to start her vendetta.

H. G. Wells: *The Time Machine*, Tor SF Classic, pb reiss, 144 pp, \$2.50. In this SF classic, a traveler to the future discovers the world of the beautiful, childlike Eloi and, in caves below them, the hideous and vicious Morlocks—who steal his Time Machine, trapping him there . . . perhaps forever.

Michael Williams: *The Balance of Power*, Questar Fantasy, pb orig, 304 pp, \$4.99. The final volume in the *From Thief to King* trilogy. Brenn, an apprentice wizard, must thwart the evil sorceress Ravenna. For if Ravenna's demonic powers are unleashed, Brenn will lose his kingdom, his love, and his life.

Terri Windling & Mark Alan Arnold, editors: *Borderland*, Tor Fantasy, pb reiss, 256 pp, \$4.99. The first shared-world Borderlands anthology, of a city where humans and elves mix—where magic meets rock 'n' roll. With stories by Charles de Lint, Ellen Kushner, Stephen R. Boyett and Bellamy Bach.

Gene Wolfe: *Castle of Days*, Tor SF, hc, 448 pp, \$22.95. A collection of essays, poems, reviews, letters, speeches, and stories, by award-winning SF and fantasy writer Gene Wolfe.

Roger Zelazny and Robert Sheckley: *Bring Me the Head of Prince Charming*, Bantam Spectra Fantasy, first mass market pb, 320 pp, \$5.50. A foolish fairy tale about Azzie Elbub, a demon competing for the Millennium Evil Deeds Award, who creates a hero to send on a doomed quest, with a special twist in the works meant to ensure that the Powers of Dark will win the grand prize.

Publishers of science fiction, fantasy, and horror books are invited to contribute material to this monthly listing. For more information, contact Bill Fawcett & Associates, 388 Hickory Road, Lake Zurich IL 60047.

Looking Forward:

Freedom Flight

by Mercedes Lackey and Ellen Guon

Coming in December 1992 from Baen Books



Cover art by David Alexander

Introduction by Bill Fawcett

This novel is set in the universe created by the popular Wing Commander™ computer games from Origin Systems. Like the best of all military books, it centers on people (and aliens) in the war and not devastation itself. Uniquely, one of the collaborators, Ellen Guon, actually helped to design the game. The result is a fast-moving, constant action book that provides a real feel for what being part of an interstellar war would be like.

In this interlude, the pilots of the Fighter Carrier *Tiger's Claw* are about to spread themselves thin in search of a raiding Kilrathi cruiser.

"We'll send out patrols at fifteen-minute intervals, following the probable flight path of that ship," he continued. "I'm pairing our experienced pilots with some of the newer flyers from the *TCS Austin*. Iceman, you're partnered with Doomsday. Hunter, you'll fly with Jazz. Spirit, take Youngblood under your wing. All of you, get down to the Flight Deck for immediate launch. On the next patrol, Paladin will fly with . . ."

Hunter followed the other pilots of the first patrol out of the briefing room, feeling as though his heart was beating double-time. *It's those damn bangover drugs; they make me feel like I'm a live electric wire.*

If I can just live through the next couple hours, I'll be fine . . .

In the lift down to the Flight Deck, Hunter leaned against the wall, trying to calm his racing heartbeat. Spirit, looking too alert and ready in her flight suit, watched him

with a small smile. "You look as though you had a good shore leave, Hunter."

He grimaced. "It was a *great* shore leave, until that MP dragged me out of bed. And for what? This sounds like a wild goose chase to me."

"We need every pilot to cover the flight paths," Spirit said seriously. "The colonel is right; the treaty between Firekka and the Confederation is too important to risk the Kilrathi disrupting it."

"Yeah, but why me?"

She gave him a smile as warm as a touch, as the lift doors opened to the Flight Deck, noisy and filled with technicians readying the starfighters for their pilots. "Fly well, my friend, and return safely," Spirit said quietly.

"Thanks, lady," he said, and grabbed his helmet from the rack next to the lift doors.

He started for his fighter, and realized that someone was following him. A young man in a flight suit, maybe twenty years old, with a shock of unruly brown hair and dark, serious eyes. His helmet was tucked under his arm, marked with the callsign "Jazz" and several musical notes.

Ob, right. My wingman.

Colson, that was his name. One of the younger pilots from the *Austin*. Hunter vaguely remembered hearing him playing piano in the rec room a week before. The boy assumed an at-attention stance.

"Oh, God, stand at ease, kid," Hunter rubbed his temples. His head still hurt, despite all the drugs. "You're Jazz, right? Jazz Colson?"

"Lieutenant Zachary 'Jazz' Colson, ready for duty, sir" Jazz saluted sharply.

"Right, right. You're the piano player, aren't you? I heard you play last week. You're good. Damn good. Let's see if you can fly that well. How many combat missions have you flown, Jazz?"

"Two. I iced a Salthi and a Dralthi." There was pride on the young man's face.

"Not bad, mate. Okay, listen up. We're supposed to fly a simple patrol, but I've learned that nothing is ever simple, not in this war. You'll stick to me like glue, understand? We probably won't run into any cats, but if we do . . . no heroics, nothing fancy, just good flying. Follow my lead, stay close on my wing, and you'll do fine." Hunter leaned against the closest fighter for support during this small speech, wishing more than anything that all he had to do was go lie down for a while. His brain might've been on overdrive from the stimulants, but his legs still weren't working quite right.

"Are you feeling all right, Captain?" Jazz asked solicitously. "You don't look so great, sir."

"I'm fine, I'm fine. Go on, get started with your pre-flight checks. We're supposed to launch in another few minutes. Once you've launched, get out of the landing pattern area and wait for me, 'bout five thousand kilometers to starboard."

Hunter continued across the Flight Deck to his fighter, which was still being serviced by the ground crew.

Next to his Rapier fighter, Paladin was talking quietly with a strange-looking young man, his dark face marked

with an intricate tattooed pattern. Spirit was having a similar talk with her wingman, Lieutenant Youngblood. *Sorry you got saddled with that boy, Mariko*, Hunter thought, climbing up the ladder into his fighter cockpit. *Nobody deserves that one.*

The blond boy from the shuttlecraft was crawling out from under the Rapier's left engine as Hunter walked up. Like everyone else this morning, he looked too alert and cheerful. "Ready for flight, sir!" he said, saluting.

And I'm seeing too damn many salutes this morning, Hunter thought grumpily. "Thanks, Ensign, ah . . ." He squinted to see the name on the kid's jumpsuit. "Ensign Cafrelli. Thank you."

"My pleasure. And you can call me Jimmy if you'd like, sir." The kid was obviously trying hard to keep a straight face. "By the way, sir, you look much better now than you did on the shuttle this morning, Sir."

"Don't remind me," Hunter muttered, then called louder. "All personnel, clear for takeoff!" He clipped the comlink wires to his helmet, and pressed the button to close the cockpit.

"Hey, Hunter, how's it hangin'?" the wry Southerner voice said into his ear, as the flight control officer's face appeared, green and fuzzy, on the vid.

Hunter grinned. Of all of the flight control officers, "Mississippi Steve" was the most entertaining. "Just fine, Steve. How soon can I launch?"

"You're first in the pattern, Captain, with immediate clearance. Your flight plan is uploading to your Nav computer right now. Have a good flight and a safe return, sir."

"Thanks, Steve." Hunter finished his pre-flight checklist and strapped himself in, then double-checked to make sure that all the ground personnel were clear of the engines. Then he flipped the switches and thumbed the engines into life.

Even through the closed cockpit, the roar of the engines drowned out all the other noise of the Flight Deck. Hunter clicked up the volume on his comlink as the entire fighter vibrated, straining against the braking system. Carefully, he pushed the throttle up slightly, moving the huge fighter toward the brightly marked launch strip.

As he maneuvered into position for the launch, the Flight Deck officer held up one hand, his other hand cupping his headset to listen more closely. Hunter eased up on the throttle, feeling the fighter quivering around him. The deck officer brought his hand down sharply, and Hunter punched the engines to full throttle, accelerating forward through the launch tube. A moment later the fighter broke through the magnetic airshield with a bare instant of resistance, and then he was free of the ship and its gravity.

Hunter banked the ship sharply to starboard, easily clearing the landing pattern traffic and heading into open space. A few seconds later he was five thousand clicks out and killed his engines, after reversing the engines briefly bring his speed down to zero. He drifted there, weightless, waiting for his wingman. It was peaceful, even with the noise of the open com channel chattering in his ear.

This is worth it all, he thought, looking back at the Tiger's Claw, the sphere of the blue-green planet Firekka beyond it. Just to be out here in space flying a fighter, this is worth all of the military crap, everything I have to deal with in the Navy.

He watched as another Rapier launched from the carrier, veering sharply toward him. *There's the boy, Hunter thought. He's looking good, has a light hand on the controls. Not overcorrecting, or turning too tightly. I think this one's going to do just fine.*

The second Rapier slowed as it approached his position. The vid flickered to life, Jazz's helmeted face smiling at him. "Lieutenant Colson reporting for duty, sir."

"Let's check out our Nav Points in sequence, Jazz. Set the nav computer for Nav 1, and AutoNav on my mark. Three . . . two . . . one . . . mark!"

Hunter punched in the buttons in sequence, and felt the fighter accelerate as the autopilot engaged. He sat back in his chair to enjoy the ride, glancing at the Nav map occasionally to check their position.

Three thousand clicks out from the Nav Point, the AutoNav dropped out and Hunter took the joystick to resume manual control of the spacecraft.

"No Kilrathi on the sensors, Captain," Jazz reported over the vidlink.

"Looks like this point is clear," Hunter said. "Reset AutoNav for Nav 2 . . ."

Jazz's image broke up on the monitor, to be replaced by Colonel Halcyon on vid override. Hunter stopped in mid-word, knowing that the Colonel never contacted pilots during a patrol unless it was an absolute emergency.

"Hunter, your orders have changed. Set course for your Nav 3 and then keep going another five thousand clicks. Spirit and Youngblood are in serious trouble. Two heavy cruisers with full fighter complement. Get moving, man!"

"Affirmative, Colonel. On my way. I'm sending Jazz back to the carrier."

Jazz's voice burst over the comlink, though the colonel was still overriding the vid circuits. "Captain, you can't!"

"Listen to me, mate. You've flown two missions . . . I've flown dozens. What do you think your odds are of surviving this? I'm saving your life, kid. Obey my orders and go back to the *Claw*."

"Affirmative, Captain." Hunter glanced out the side cockpit view, to see Jazz's fighter peeling off in the correct direction. *At least the kid obeys orders.* He punched up the new navigation coordinates, and checked his afterburner fuel reserve. He had enough to get himself there on partial burn, with enough to use in reserve for the fight. Fortunately, the main engines on this fighter ran on nuclear cells, so he wasn't in danger of being stranded. He kicked in the 'burners and felt the engines vibrating as they soared up to full power. *Let's go, let's go!*

He keyed through the comm channels until he heard Spirit's voice, faint and crackling with static. "Youngblood, where . . . you . . . form . . . my wing . . . NOW!"

* * *

Spirit rolled her ship hard right to stay close behind the Kilrathi, glancing desperately at the power readings on her ship's lasercannons, slowly building up to full power again. The small fighter's powerplant was straining to recharge the weapons . . . she waited until the last moment, when the Kilrathi fighter was veering sharply away, to pull the trigger and let loose the volley of deadly red fire. The aft engine of the enemy fighter peeled away and exploded, taking the rest of the fighter with it. Spirit veered again to avoid the debris, scanning her aft view for Youngblood.

She couldn't see him, either aft or to either side. What she could see were the two Kilrathi heavy cruisers, and the enemy fighters launching from those cruisers, one by one. As soon as they had a full complement of fighters launched, they'd be after her.

She and Youngblood had come out of the asteroid field and into this ambush without warning. Only one more enemy fighter was attacking them now, but in another few seconds a dozen more would join in the fight. "Youngblood, where are you? Form on my wing, right now!"

There was still no sign of the Lieutenant, but his image formed on her vidscreen. "Spirit, I'm on one guy's tail! Can't break now!"

"Youngblood, there are too many of them! Form on my wing, we have to get out of here!" She had a clear run now that the fighter attacking her was destroyed, an open path back to the asteroids, no fighters would be able to intercept her before she was in the dubious safety of the asteroid field. At least if she was in the rocks they wouldn't be able to use their superior numbers against her. In the asteroid field they'd have at least a small chance of surviving this ambush. "Youngblood, do it now!"

"Spirit, I nearly have missile lock . . . I've almost got tone . . ."

"Damn it, Youngblood!" Spirit yanked the joystick hard to bring her fighter around in a tight turn. She couldn't leave him behind, even though she knew she was probably committing suicide by trying to save him.

She lined up for a missile lock on the fighter that he was pursuing, listening for the tone before firing. The shrill lock signal wailed in her ear, and she punched the missile a moment later, already turning to head back toward the asteroid field. "He's history, Youngblood! Now get on my wing!" she shouted over the com.

"Damn it, that was my kill, Spirit!"

"Get on my wing, Youngblood, or we're both dead! Can't you see that they're launching more fighters, you idiot?"

Looking aft, Spirit saw the missile following the lone Kilrathi as he twisted and dove, trying to break the lock. A moment later, there was a bright flash as the enemy fighter exploded. Youngblood steered into position on her left wing as they ran for the asteroids.

Too late, Spirit saw, looking back. There were at least a dozen enemy fighters moving toward them. They'd be overtaken before they were in the asteroid field. Spirit tried to breathe slowly and calmly, watching the enemy

ships approaching in her aft view. The Kilrathi were only a few hundred meters behind the two Terran ships when they blossomed into an attack formation, banking in from all sides to target them.

She felt the vibration of the engines straining at the base of her spine as she flew at top speed, willing her ship to leap across the remaining distance and into the rocks. . . .

The first two Kilrathi ships tilted down into position behind them, angling for cannon targeting. She saw the burst of cannon fire a moment later, and rolled her fighter to avoid it. "Roll left, Youngblood!" she shouted into the com, knowing that he probably wouldn't have time to react.

The laser fire caught his fighter on the edge of one engine, which exploded in a hail of sparks. Youngblood's fighter spun helplessly out of control, back toward the Kilrathi fighters closely pursuing them. Two of the Kilrathi rolled sharply to avoid the damaged Terran fighter; the third crashed headlong into it. The explosion burned white-hot in her eyes, blinding her for a moment to everything else. The shock wave hit her fighter a split-second later, and she punched the afterburners, fighting hard to keep control of her craft.

Youngblood's image was still on the monitor, frozen in mid-word. His eyes were wide with surprise and horror as the image fizzled out a moment later.

Damn them! Spirit kept her thumb on the afterburners, knowing that her only chance now was in speed. *If I can get into the cover of the asteroids, there still might be a chance to get out of this alive.* . . .

"Hey, sweetheart, what's up?" Hunter's voice came through the com a moment before his face appeared on the screen.

"Hunter! Where are you?" She glanced at the radar, and saw the blue blip that was his ship on the edge of the screen. Too far away to help. . . .

"I'm in the asteroids, heading toward your last known position. If you can get into the rocks, lady, we can take on these bastards. I'm readin' five tailing you, with some more coming in from those cruisers."

"Hunter, don't do this! Head back to the *Claw*. You can't help me now."

"Hey, you're not giving up on me, lady! What, y'think you can have a cat-chasin' party without me? Just get into those rocks, I'll be there in another minute. . . ."

She hit the edge of the asteroid field at full burn, flying on pure instinct and luck. The rocks were going past her at a blur . . . she dodged and weaved a path through the rocks, yanked the 'stick down to duck under one asteroid. There was an alien scream over her headset and another explosion as one of the Kilrathi impacted against rock she had just avoided.

Cannon fire scorched past her right wing; she swung left into the thickest of the asteroids, slowing her speed just enough so she could dodge the rocks.

She glanced down at her 'scope, and saw Hunter's blip, moving toward her at top speed. Just a little further . . . a little further . . .

The wail of a missile lock warning ripped through

her ears. She looked back to see the missile closing in on her, homing in on her engines. No time to dodge, no time to do anything, even scream. . . .

She slammed on the brakes, reversing the engine to come to a hard stop and then killing the engine at the last second. The sudden stop shoved her forward, then back into the pilot's chair so hard that she thought she was going to black out, but the heat-seeking missile sailed past to explode harmlessly against an asteroid. Behind her, the Kilrathi banked to avoid a collision . . . *They're learning*, she thought grimly . . . then the three enemy fighters swerved to come in for an attack run.

Spirit punched on the engines. For an awful second, all she could hear was the splutter of her ship's engines as they failed to ignite. Then they roared back into life and she hit the afterburners. She was beyond the diving Kilrathi a moment later, using the asteroids to block their weapons' fire. But she knew she couldn't play this game forever . . . soon they'd maneuver to box her in, to force her in front of their guns, and it would be over.

She banked up and over one asteroid, down and around another spinning rock. The Kilrathi tried to flank her, then one of them broke formation to close on her tail. She swerved left, but not before she heard the warning wail of a missile lock. In another split-second the Kilrathi pilot would fire.

Another Terran fighter soared past her, barely five feet away from her cockpit, the Rapier firing all guns directly at the enemy craft on her tail. Through the cockpit, she caught a glimpse of Hunter's wide grin. Then her fighter shook with the explosion of the Kilrathi that had been tailing her. Glancing aft, she saw the fragments of the enemy fighter drifting in all directions.

The other two Kilrathi panicked, realizing that what had been an obvious and easy kill was now even odds again. Spirit yanked the 'stick in a hard turn and let fly a dumb-fire missile at one of the Kilrathi at point-blank range, braking right to avoid the resulting explosion. The last Kilrathi shrieked something in his alien language on her vidscreen as he crashed into an asteroid in his attempts to avoid Hunter's deadly aim.

"You all right, sweetheart?" Hunter's helmeted face appeared in her vid. "Are there any other cats after you?"

She nodded. "Yes, but we have time to get out of here, if we move fast. The other pilots will have to find us in these asteroids."

"Top speed back to the *Claw*, Mariko. What about Youngblood?"

"He did not survive."

"Damn." Hunter sighed. "Let's get moving, lady. We have a report to file at home base. Any idea why two cat cruisers decided to take a ride through this system in the middle of nowhere?"

She knew what he was thinking. *What in the hell are they doing here?* She only wished she had an answer.

"No idea. But I am sure we will find out soon, Hunter-san." ♦

My Life as a Child

Part Two

Thomas M. Disch

In the summer of 1953 the Disch family, now seven in number, moved back to the Twin Cities, where I attended three different high schools. The first was Alexander Ramsay, a brand-new high school in the suburb of Roseville, staffed with mostly brand-new teachers. For the first time in my life I had some teachers who were men, including Mr. Bush, the physics teacher. St. Paul's hadn't had physics, and thanks to Mr. Bush and Ramsay High School I discovered that I had a body! I had generally been an all-A student, but I've never been prouder of any mark on my report card than the B that I finally got from Mr. Bush in my last six-week period of physics.

Miss Aller, my algebra teacher, was responsible for another discovery I made that year—classical music. Up to that point music had meant either the songs on the radio, which were pretty bland in that pre-rock-and-roll era, or else the requiem masses we'd been taught to sing at St. Paul's. Miss Aller had just returned from a year of study in Amsterdam, where she'd seen a production of Wagner's opera *Tristan und Isolde*, in which (as Miss Aller reported) there's one entire act in which nothing happens but the two lovers, Tristan and Isolde, lie on their backs on a dark stage and sing at the top of their lungs in German. This seemed so unlikely that I went to the music room at the downtown branch of the Public Library in St. Paul and listened to the records. Not

only was it true, it was wonderful. Overnight I was converted to classical music, and soon I had my own \$19.95 three-speed record player. I listened to Ravel's *Bolero* and Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* and Beethoven's Fifth Symphony over and over and over until both my small stock of LPs and my father's nerves were worn to a frazzle. I have managed to hold on to a single LP from my high school days—Shostakovich's Quartet No. 3 played by the Fine Arts Quartet. It's on the turntable now, but sadly my father can't shout from the other room, "Turn that damned thing off!" Maybe now that he's in heaven he's even learned to like Shostakovich, but somehow I doubt it.

In my sophomore year I attended Cretin, a Catholic military high school named for a former bishop of St. Paul. I managed to escape the military part of the curriculum by learning to play a tenor saxophone in the summer before school started and joining the marching band. It turned out that I had zero musical ability, and to this day the only musical instrument I can play acceptably is the phonograph.

It was at Cretin that I became a Teenage Rebel and an Outsider, thanks in large part to Brother Anthony, who taught biology and was certifiably insane. In fact, he had been institutionalized for the first twelve weeks of the school year, during which time I was getting my usual A's. Then Brother Anthony took charge, and we got daily lectures on

his two manias, which were the evil of putting fluoride in drinking water and Senator Joe McCarthy, the right-wing demagogue who was then conducting a crusade against the communist menace, which conveniently included everyone who disagreed with Joe McCarthy—and, in Brother Anthony's case, everyone who disagreed with *him*, especially on the subject of fluoridation. In due course I came into conflict with Brother Anthony and was expelled from biology class. The school principal, when I was called before him, as much as admitted that Brother Anthony was bonkers, but that was not the issue. The issue was that Brother Anthony was in charge of the biology class, and if I wanted to get back into his class, I would have to apologize. The slaps I'd received were not to the point. I apologized, got a C in biology, and transferred for my junior year to Central High School. That was also, not coincidentally, the year I left the Catholic church.

Central was a good school, and I had some very good teachers there, including, in my junior year, the best English teacher I've ever had, Miss Jeannette Cochran. That was the year I discovered poetry. Of course, poetry had been served up in the English textbooks I'd studied, and I had been required to memorize some of these grade school standbys, including a lot of Longfellow.

"The Song of Hiawatha":

By the shores of Gitchee Gumme,

By the shining Big-Sea-Water,
Stood the wigwam of Nokomis,
Daughter of the Moon, Nokomis. . .

"The Village Blacksmith":

Under a spreading chestnut-tree
The village smithy stands;
The smith a mighty man is he,
With large and sinewy hands. . .

But such poems as those seemed little different from, and about as trivial as! the very first poem I ever heard, from the lips of my Aunt Aurelia:

Oo-ee Gooley was a worm,
A mighty worm was he;
He sat upon the railroad track,
The train he did not see:
Oo-ee Gooley!

If that was all that poetry amounted to, then clearly there was no reason to bother with it. But now it dawned on me that poetry amounted to a whole lot more than that, that poetry was ordinary language gone to heaven—and I could go there with it! I read Shakespeare. I read Alexander Pope. I read *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* and "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." But more than that, I memorized them. Miss Cochran required her English students to set a quota of the number of lines of poetry they were prepared to memorize in the course of the school year. One hundred was considered a stiff commitment. I contracted for a thousand, and by the end of the year I had met my commitment—and become, in the process, a poet myself, having written a drama of several pages in rhyming verse and my required junior year essay on the subject of Alexander Pope's use of the heroic couplet. Since then I've published something over five hundred poems in all kinds of magazines, from *Poetry* to *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* and *AMAZING® Stories*.

One of my children's books is in verse, *The Tale of Dan De Lion*, and another is forthcoming from Story Line Press, *A Child's Garden of Grammar*. A goodly portion of all the poems I've written are probably as suitable for kids as for grown-ups, especially if the category of "kids"

includes ages 13 to 17. Once again I find myself impatient with the notion that kids and grown-ups should live in separate literary worlds. I didn't, and I wasn't expected to. By the age of 10 or 11 I enjoyed most of the movies my parents enjoyed, and I was reading my mother's Perry Mason mysteries and my father's *Saturday Evening Post* serials at the same time that I was reading Hardy Boys mysteries. As for poetry, it was common for English school children of 70 or 80 years ago not only to be reading the most difficult Latin poetry, but they were also required to write Latin poetry themselves. It's just a matter of practice making perfect. The same precocious Latin scholars would have marveled (as I do myself) at what some 12-year-old computer wizards are capable of nowadays.

In any case, writing poetry is not necessarily a rare and special accomplishment. Anyone who is reading this already has the required ability, which is simply a command of the English language. Poetry is an art, like dancing, that's available to anyone with the urge to perform. In Japan, people get together for poetry-writing parties just the way people here will get together and dance. You don't have to study ballet for years in order to get out on the dance floor and have fun, and the same is true of poetry. Just do it.

Speaking of ballet, that was another and even more surprising discovery that I made at age 15. In the summer between Cretin and Central High School, I got a job working as a page in the children's department of the St. Paul Public Library. One day the library had scheduled a lecture and no one had come to it, so to keep the lecturer from being embarrassed all the library pages were recruited to form an audience. The lecturer was Anna Andahazy, and the subject of her lecture was ballet. She had been a famous dancer with the Ballets Russes, and now with her husband Lorand Andahazy she ran the Twin Cities' leading ballet school. I fell in love with Mrs. Andahazy that very afternoon, and that fall, as soon as her school reopened, I started to study ballet.

I had no more natural talent for ballet than I'd had for the saxophone, but I loved the sweat and exertion and the sheer euphoria of dancing. At age 15 I needed to get physical, but despite Mr. Bush's influence back in ninth grade, I was no jock. I didn't like competitive sports, because (to be candid) I was no good at them and I hated losing. But ballet wasn't about winning or losing: it was about learning how to do it. And once you could do it, it felt good, like swimming or skating, only more so. So for the last two years I was in high school my evening and weekend classes at the Andahazy School were the center of my life. Eventually I even performed with the Andahazys' own ballet company, the Ballet Borealis. I was only a member of the corps de ballet in Act IV of Tchaikovsky's *Sleeping Beauty* and never in the spotlight, but it was enough to change my life.

Because only a few months later I was in New York on the stage of the Metropolitan Opera performing in Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. New York City had been the land of my heart's desire since at least sophomore year, when I had confided to Mr. Hall, the one friendly teacher I'd had at Cretin, that I would be going there as soon as I was graduated from high school, if not before. I did resist departing from Minnesota without a high school diploma, but as soon as I had that in hand, and some money saved from a summer job as a structural steel draftsman, I got to New York by tagging along with my three best friends from the Andahazy school, Alan Iverson, Kay Wilson, and Judy Anderson. They had gone there to study ballet and become professional dancers, which turned out (sad to tell) not to be in their cards. I didn't have any illusions about my future in ballet, but at the first sight of its skyscrapers from the other side of the Hudson River I knew that Manhattan was where I belonged. A hundred movies had told me so, and I believed them.

While my three friends started taking classes at the Metropolitan Opera's ballet school, I worked at various full- and part-time jobs—in offices and bookstores and on the

night shift of a newspaper that no longer exists, the *Daily Mirror*. Through Alan Iverson I got to be a super at the Metropolitan. Super is short for supernumerary, or extra. We're the people who don't sing or dance but just add our bodies to the stage. My first role was as a black-moor servant to Don Giovanni, for which I wore a lot of greasepaint and a very fancy costume. Later I was a spear-carrier in the Royal Ballet's *Swan Lake*, in which I co-starred (in my own mind, at least) with Dame Margot Fonteyn. At the height of my career as a super I was a slave in the Bolshoi Ballet's *Spartacus*, one of four who carried the prima ballerina onstage in a sedan chair, and when we set her down, I was the one who prostrated myself so she could use my bare back to step down to the floor. Later on I also distributed a lot of wax fruit to other supers at a wild Roman orgy.

Supering was fun, but it was not a career with long-range prospects. It didn't even pay the rent, and there was scarcely a room in New York cheaper than mine on Thompson Street, in the neighborhood that is now called Soho and considered fashionable but which was then Little Italy and just an ordinary slum. My rent was \$18 a month, for a cold-water flat that was heated by a gas stove and an electric heater. The toilet out in the hall was shared with another apartment. I had a bathtub that also served, with its top lowered, as my kitchen table. In 1959 the building got steam heat, and my first roommate moved out, so that I now had two rooms, heated, for \$32. I built my first bookcase in what had once been a window between the two rooms, and soon it was filled with books. I learned to cook spaghetti like a New Yorker, not soft and mooshy like it had come out of a can.

And I supported myself in this glamorous lifestyle by working in the checkroom of the Majestic Theater, checking hats and coats and selling orange juice at the intermission. I worked eight performances a week and I earned \$36, from which taxes and union dues were deducted. My theatrical career continued,

off and on, for the next five years, during the long runs of two musical comedies, *The Music Man* and *Camelot*. One of the great fringe benefits of the job was the chance to see most of the other shows on Broadway, by trading jobs with other checkroom attendants or by working at special Sunday performances. Thirty years later my checkroom experience would turn out to be an unexpected professional asset, when I was asked to become the theater reviewer for *The Nation*, a weekly magazine I had written book reviews for. Thanks to my job at the Majestic I had seen more Broadway shows than most people who come to them in limousines. I didn't have to pay to see the shows then, and I don't have to pay now. My lucky stars, I thank you.

Meanwhile, what about my future? Did I have one? At some point in my last year of high school I'd got the bee in my bonnet that I wanted to be an architect. I'd read as many as three or four books on the subject and had taken one art class in senior year, by way of avoiding chemistry. This was the basis for my ambition. There was an art and architecture school in New York called Cooper Union that offered free tuition to anyone who passed its entrance exam. I passed the exam and attended Cooper Union for about six weeks, until I discovered that man lives not by free tuition alone. I couldn't do the work the school required and still earn enough to survive. It wasn't that hard to choose survival, since I'd learned, even from my little time at Cooper Union, that I didn't have the makings of an architect. I was interested more in how a building looked than the way it was *built*, which is not the right attitude with which to approach a career in architecture.

There was nothing else I had in mind for myself as a career, but I understood that wherever I might be headed I would do well to arrive there with a college diploma. So I bit the bullet and got a 9-to-5 job at the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company that paid half my tuition to evening school at New York University. The job at Metropolitan Life was a far cry from my earlier job at the Metropolitan Opera, but I stuck

it out for a year and three months, until my grades at night school were rewarded with a full-time scholarship.

Now I will make a shameful confession. I have always liked being in school. Not the social part of it, though that can be a lot of fun. I like the classes and learning things I didn't know and taking tests and writing papers. I could become fascinated in almost any subject. I was taking calculus because I thought it was something everyone should know about, not because I had any intention of going into a career where it would be useful. Likewise the languages I've studied: Latin, French, German, Italian, and Spanish. I never got really good in any of them, and once I'd reached a certain point in each one, I stopped studying and they gradually got too rusty to be any use at all. The one subject that I "discovered" at NYU that I'd never taken much interest in till then was history. After my first required course in World History, I felt like someone who'd just inherited a vast estate. The past, after all, like the moon, belongs to everyone. But somehow it had never seemed real to me in my grade school and high school years. People had built cathedrals and factories and fought wars and created the entire incredible city I lived in, but because they were dead I took everything they'd done for granted, more or less the way we all tend to take our parents for granted.

The future was another matter. I had always taken an interest in that. After all, I intended to live there. But now I grasped the obvious idea that the past and the present and the future are a continuous chain of cause and effect. It dawned on me that even if I wanted to be a science fiction writer (and that had begun to seem possible), history would be the key, because what science fiction and history have in common is their global dimensions. How could anyone have the nerve to write about the future history of the world who hasn't studied its past?

So I changed my major from English to History and hit the books and worked at the checkroom at the Majestic Theater and did quite well at

all of that until, in May of 1962, my overheated engines seized up and I had what we then called a nervous breakdown. Meaning that some part of me that I refused to listen to understood that I was overdoing things and decided to go on strike. I didn't go to classes in May and missed my final exams. What I did instead was hole up in my apartment on Thompson Street and write my first science fiction story, which somehow I knew I was finally ready to write in a form that was publishable.

I was lucky, and I was right. In July I received a check for \$112.50 from the editor of *Fantastic Stories*, Cele Lalli, and in the October issue of that magazine my first story, "The Double Timer," appeared in print. I was a writer, and here was the proof. "The Double Timer" was not a particularly good story, but the next full-length story I wrote, "White Fang Goes Dingo," was a lot better, though no editor took it in its original, rough version. I was still an apprentice writer and had a lot to learn. But eventually "White Fang Goes Dingo" did get published, and that version got expanded into a novel, which was published by Ace Books under the title (which I hated) of *Mankind Under the Leash*. (Since then I've been able to publish it with the title I wanted for it, *The Puppies of Terra*.) Even though "White Fang" wasn't published at once, I knew when I'd written it that I had the wherewithal to be a professional writer. If I could just survive . . .

Things were touch-and-go during the next two years, as I went through a series of jobs I didn't really want to have in order to support my nocturnal writing habit. I worked as a bank teller and an insurance claims adjuster and a mortuary attendant (that was during a summer visit back to Minnesota), but I never lasted long at any job—until I discovered advertising. I owe my break in advertising to David Leddick, an old friend from my days as a super at the Met, who was now an advertising executive. David told me to make up a sheaf of sample ads for any products I could think of ads for. My personal favorite from my sheaf of samples, and the one that got me the job, was an ad

that promoted Campbell's Pork and Beans, rubbed in one's face, as the secret of a good complexion.

I not only enjoyed my work at Doyle Dane Bernbach well enough to last at the job for the next fifteen months, but I also, as a direct result of learning how to write ad copy, got my act together as a poet. An advertising copywriter has to squeeze what he has to say into as few words as possible, because he knows that no one *wants* to read what he has written. Very much the same is true of poetry. Poetry also has this in common with the good ad: it often helps if it's a little off the wall, or weird, or strange, or otherwise captures your attention. And this: a good poem, like a good ad, grabs you by your basic instincts.

But the most valuable lesson that I learned at Doyle Dane was the ability to use the wastepaper basket. I was constantly writing ads that I thought were pretty good and having my boss decide they weren't good enough and that I could do better. And I would go back to my desk and I would write a better ad. Eventually I learned to be my own boss and to recognize which things I'd written were wonky and which were workable, and I learned how to take what was wonky and *make* it work.

While I worked at the ad agency, I was also writing and publishing stories, and the stories were getting better. I began to know other science fiction writers and editors, and one of these, Damon Knight, asked me if I had a novel I wanted to write. If so, I should produce an outline of the plot and he would show it to Tom Dardis at Berkley Books, and Berkley might contract for me to write it. And that's what happened. In November 1964, after I'd received \$750, half my advance for the unwritten novel, I flew to Mexico City, and took a bus to a small town called Amecameca, and there I rented three rooms that looked out at the walled garden of Señora Chelius, to whom I'd been recommended by her earlier tenant, the science fiction writer Avram Davidson. I didn't speak a word of Spanish when I arrived in Amecameca, and except for

two Mormon missionaries I was the only gringo in town. There was little I could do but read books and take walks and write my first novel—which was done by the spring of the next year, shortly after my 25th birthday, a little more than half a lifetime ago.

I rewarded myself with an adventure that had me being towed up a jungle river in Guatemala on a concrete barge and living with Pentecostal missionaries in Belize and climbing ruined Aztec pyramids in Yucatán. Then for a brief while I sampled the life of an official American expatriate in the "artists' colony" of San Miguel de Allende, but I found I didn't at all fit in. For all the writers in the writers' colony were much older than me, and liked to drink a lot and talk about the problems they had with writing, which was usually that they didn't do any.

I returned that summer to New York, worked a few months in advertising, wrote and sold some more novel outlines, and then took off to Europe with my friend and sometime collaborator, John Sladek, in order to write the five books I'd sold in outline. I think it must have been at about that time that I became a grown-up. That is, someone who knows what he wants to do and is so busy doing it that he doesn't have much time to do anything else.

In *some* ways, because I've had the good luck to be a writer, I've never had to be a grown-up completely. I didn't get a driver's license until I was 28, and I didn't own a car of my own until I was 44. I have yet to be a home-owner, though I may be soon, having made an offer for a house with a beautiful view of the Delaware River. I didn't get married and have children, and as a result I still tend to identify with the kids and teenagers in movies and novels. Indeed, a lot of my own novels start off with the childhoods of my heroes and heroines.

Looking back on the first 25 years of my childhood, it strikes me that the things I didn't finish doing have been just as important as the things I got done. For instance, I didn't become a ballet dancer, but the experience of studying ballet was more

important in the long run in my becoming a writer than most of the English classes I've taken (except Miss Cochran's). I learned from Mrs. Andahazy that beauty is something you build day by day. I didn't become an architect either (and I don't know *what* lesson I might have learned from that)—or an advertising copywriter or an insurance executive or a historian, which were all, at one time or another, ideas that other people had of what I ought to be. Until I was actually a published writer, no one, including myself, thought that was what I ought to do for a living—for the very good reason that it is not a realistic goal for a career.

If I don't say much more about the second 25 years of my life, it's not that they haven't been busy. There are many more stories I might tell about friends and lovers and business partners. I've lived in a lot of different countries and been sent off on trips by the United States Information Service to such faraway places as India and Israel and Brazil. I've shaken the hands of a few famous people, including a large num-

ber of the science fiction writers I idolized as a kid.

But it seems to me that most of the essential things that turn up in my books are there in my childhood. For instance, *On Wings of Song* is a book about a boy from the Iowa corn belt who wants more than anything to be able to sing (because in his future world that is a means of achieving out-of-body flight) but who just doesn't have the knack. It's surely no accident that the author of that book is a failed ballet dancer and a lousy saxophonist. It's no accident that the boy whose most memorable early reading experience was Jack London's *Call of the Wild* should later in his life write a novella called "White Fang Goes Dingo," which takes its title and much of its plot from Jack London's *White Fang*.

All of this looking back across the past is not very typical for me. Much as I enjoyed my childhood, even during those teenage years when I thought, as most teenagers do, that I was miserable, I don't feel much nostalgia for the 1940s and 50s and 60s. I'm much more interested right

now in the 90s and the . . . what are they going to call the decade after that? I'm eager right now to finish the next children's book that I've already begun, which is called *The Teddy Bear's Tragedy*, and which is guaranteed to offend traditional children's book editors even more than *The Brave Little Toaster* did.

Then, after *The Teddy Bear's Tragedy*, I want to do a thriller, *Stray Bullets*, about street kids in a future New York City that is a lot like modern Brazil. But first, I have to finish *The Priest*, which is the new novel I've just begun, and then I might take time to finish another novel, which I began in the 60s, called *The Pressure of Time*. Since I'm not a particularly fast writer, I realize that by the time I've accomplished all these good intentions, any of my readers who read *The Brave Little Toaster* and *The Brave Little Toaster Goes to Mars* when they were kids will probably have entered the Army or college or have kids of their own.

One day you're a kid, the next day you're a grown-up. It's been the story of my life. ♦



A Troll of Surewould Forest

Part Two

Thomas M. Disch

Chapter Sixteen

One and One Makes Two

"You know," said Joe the moment he was conscious and saw Artemesia there beside him looking so beautiful.

Then he just smiled, forgetting whatever it was she was supposed to know, which was the fact that she was so beautiful.

She smiled at him.

"What if," he began again from another direction.

"Yes?" she prompted, still smiling.

"What if we got married," he said, not as a question but more as a simple problem like $1 + 1$ with a simple answer like 2.

"We don't even know each other," she pointed out.

"I love you," he said with great conviction.

She smiled. Then, when he didn't volunteer any more information or undertake to argue his point, she repeated



Illustration by Lissanne Lake

what she'd already said, since it didn't seem to have sunk in. "We don't really *know* each other."

He grinned. "But that's not *all* I've got going for me."

She laughed. "You're sweet," she said. "You really are. Sweet as strawberry ice cream."

"You're beautiful. And I love you. In fact, you'll never meet anyone who'll love you more than me. Because I'll always love you more than anyone else ever could. You have to believe that."

"I think you're delirious. I think you should rest a while longer and—"

"I'll have to get a better job. I realize that. I don't know what kind of job yet, but I promise that will be the first thing I take care of once I'm . . . once I'm . . ." Once he was out of Surewould Forest and back in the real world was the idea he wanted to express, but he'd been in Surewould Forest such a long time now that the notion of there being any world but this was getting hazy almost to the point of vanishing.

"Now don't be making promises you can't keep," said Artemesia.

"But I don't want you to be ashamed of me."

"I'm *not* ashamed of you," she insisted.

"Do you remember when we kissed?" he said dreamily.

"That was lovely," she agreed.

For the longest while he didn't say another word. He just thought about her saying their kiss had been lovely. It had been, but it seemed even lovelier to hear her say so.

The judge from the judges' stand held out his scales. They were in perfect balance. In each pan was half the ring Joe and Artemesia had given him. The judge had very carefully sliced it down the middle to make two rings.

"One is for me," said Joe, "and one is for you."

"Oh, you're awake again." She folded up a newspaper and put it on a table by the bed.

"Where'd he go?" asked Joe.

"You've been dreaming," she explained.

"Maybe this is a dream," said Joe with a sudden dismal intuition.

"Maybe it is. Would that be a bad thing?"

"No, not if you married me. Will you marry me?"

She didn't say yes or no. She just looked down at her hands folded in her lap.

"Is it because you don't know anything about me, is that the problem? Because if it is, I'll tell you whatever you'd like to know. Or as much as I'm able to remember. Everything that's been happening here in Surewould Forest is clear as a movie in my head. But my life before that is kind of blurry. In any case, I don't think it ever was very interesting."

"Well then," she said brightly, "why not tell me about the life you led here, up to the time we met?"

"You'd really like to hear that?" he asked eagerly.

She nodded without looking up from her folded hands. When he had told her everything that had happened in Surewould Forest up to the moment he'd made his entrance onto the Dorkery field, though in a much more condensed version than the one you've been reading,

Artemesia unfolded her hands and placed them palms-down on her knees. "Well, it's clear to me what must be done," she said.

Joe thought it was clear that they should get married, but he didn't think that was equally clear to Artemesia yet, so he didn't bring up that possibility again. "I'll do whatever you want me to," he promised fervently.

"Actually, it's something I'm better suited to do than you. You have to stay here and build up your strength till the doctor gives you your walking papers. Meanwhile, I can go back to that friend of yours by the dandelion bush, return *his* pin to him and bring back *your* pin to you. You surely don't want to spend the rest of your time in Surewould Forest living out someone else's adventure."

"I don't know about that," said Joe. "I've been having a lot nicer time since I made the switch than I was having on my own. That Alecto was pretty awful, and her daughter was worse."

"Aren't you forgetting the nice *owl*?" Artemesia hinted.

"But what about *us*? If I hadn't taken Loser's place in the Tournament of Poses, we'd have never met. Would we?"

"I don't know. Possibly not. But now that we have, there's no need for you to go on pretending to be someone you're not."

"But I've stopped pretending. They used my real name to introduce me at the Tournament, remember?"

"Ah, but consider poor Loser himself. If you let him have his pin back, he won't have to go on reciting that dreadful poem. That can't be much of an adventure for him, can it?"

"Gee, you're right. I never thought of that."

"So give me the pin"—she pointed to his earlobe—"and I'll be back with your own pin in no time at all."

Taking the pin out of his ear was more painful than sticking it in had been, but Joe managed to do it without even cringing up his face, since Artemesia was watching. The pin was sticky with blood, so to keep Artemesia from being stained by it, he broke off one of the leaves from a long-stemmed rose in the vase on the table and folded it around the pin. "There," he said, and handed it to her.

"Now you just rest till I come back."

"Okay," said Joe, closing his eyes obediently.

When he heard her go out the door he opened his eyes again. He wasn't feeling the least bit tired. Kind of floaty and disconnected, but that might have been due to Artemesia's going off with his pin. Though the last time he'd taken the pin out, he remembered, the world had just disappeared around him.

Too late the truth of the matter dawned on him. He'd given her the wrong pin. Loser's pin was still in his left earlobe, which Artemesia hadn't seen from the side of the bed she'd been sitting on. She'd gone off with the pin of D*th's long-dead daughter, Gonorrhil.

I'll have to stop her, he thought. But no sooner had he raised his head from the pillow and plunked his bare feet on the floor than the whole room did a flip-flop, and Joe fell back onto the sheets and down through the long black hole into the Land of Dreams.

Chapter Seventeen

Chateau Léthé-Rothschild 2967

There had to be a phone somewhere. There had to. She would phone what's-his-name, her boss, Rothbart, and say okay, enough, your turn, I quit. But the g*dd*mn concourse, corridor, whatever, was a beehive; there were queues in front of every phone booth. The word itself, queue, made her feel queasy. I've got to get out of this place, she told herself.

But the further afield she might roam in the precincts of Surewould Forest, the more surely she would get entangled in brambles of plot and theme. And it was not fair. That was the fact she had to communicate at once to Rothbart What's-His-Name. Silverbowl: there, she *could* remember it; she had not lost her grip.

I've done this once in simulation, she reminded herself. The thing to bear in mind at all times was that nothing was real. Never mind what she might feel, it was all a fiction. Not even her name was the same here as it was back in reality. Her name was really . . . Well, in any case it wasn't Albatross. *No one's* name is Albatross.

The thing to bear in mind was that she must forget his face, his smile, his kiss, must utterly blot those truths from memory. She must forget the meaning, so crisp and definite, of his upper lip at the moment he said . . . She must forget it.

Or the way, after her arrow had pierced his heart—But all of that was technology, psychology, art.

No, she told herself, I will *not* fall in love again. Whereupon she stopped right where she was, in the middle of all the sports fans bustling in and out of the Dorkery, where the Tournament of Poses was still in progress, adjusted the diadem on her brow, signaled to a pianist who wasn't there, and segued into her song with the following three-line intro:

I have been in love too often to believe
That it is ever anything like tales we weave.
Joe is no Romeo. I am sure as h'll no Eve.

Then, having caught the attention of several sports fans who gathered around her, including a strolling guitar player who happened to know the chording, Artemesia belted out:

The Ballad of the Sad Bouquet

I have been working too long for a living,
Told too many lies, done too much forgiving,
To start to pretend
That that's all at an end
And I'm back at square one
With my hair in a bun,
Just waiting for someone or other to say,
I love you, I need you, accept my bouquet.

I see it, I smell it, it's wilted and sad.
Were I to accept it, I'd have to be mad.

Just leave me as everyone left me before.
Love is too punishing, I am too sore.
Please, if you love me as much as you say,
Abscond, disappear, take your leave, go away.
I won't love you.
I don't need you.
And here's your bouquet.

There was some light applause, and one of the dorks, who had been moved to tears by her rendition, which was heartfelt though scarcely professional, asked her if she would sing "Melancholy Baby." Before Artemesia could pull herself together and explain that she was not, thank you very much, one of the Dorkery's paid entertainers, the phone she hadn't been able to find before started to ring.

The guitar player answered and said it was for her. "Hey," said Rothbart Silverbowl, when she came to the phone, "I didn't know you were a chanteuse in your secret life."

"You b*st*rd," she said. "I should have known. G*d d*mn." She started to cry.

"Albertine," he soothed.

"My name isn't . . . Albertine," she sniffled. "It's Artemesia . . ." Her voice broke, but at last she choked out the ridiculous surname: "Albatross! G*d d*mn it, Bart, you've got to let me out of here. I will not fall in love with him. I refuse to. It's not fair to me, and it's terribly cruel to him."

"Hey, sweetheart, remember—this is a work of fiction. You're performing an essential social service, nothing more than that."

"This is all because of last month when I refused to put out for you, isn't it? You son of a b*tch."

"Ah-ha, it seems you haven't entirely lost track of your true identity. But as it happens I don't bear any ill will for that evening, since I was p*ss*d to a degree that I don't remember my asking or your refusing. However, my very obliviousness may provide an answer to your problem. What I would suggest, Albertine—Artemesia, if you prefer—is that you proceed directly to a wine shop and buy a bottle of Chateau Léthé-Rothschild. '67 is generally considered the best vintage. Keep the bottle in reserve till it's time to bid a fond farewell to young Lochinvar. Offer a toast to eternal love, take but one sip, and zip, love is a dream you've forgotten. If that's what's worrying you."

"That's what's worrying me," she agreed.

"So otherwise, tell me, how's the Big Bowl?"

"Oh, I'm having a lovely time. Other people's dreams always seem so much more vivid than one's own. The colors are brighter, and everything just gallops along. Which reminds me: how long have I been gone? No, don't tell me. That's too much like asking how long have I got left."

"If I may say so, Albertine, your pendulum is swinging wildly."

"Isn't it, though? If I were a bell, I'd be ringing. Oh, before you hang up, tell me—what's *he* up to?"

"Young Lochinvar? He's asleep, I assume. When you

took his pin, I just switched him to "Nap" and followed your footsteps. This reminds me, Trilby, I'm still waiting for your rendition of 'Melancholy Baby.' "

"F*ck off, Svengali," she whispered into the receiver and hung up.

Bart's problem, she decided as she proceeded down a stairway to the concourse level of the Dorkery, where she hoped to find a wine shop, was that he was manipulative. On the other hand, that was also his job, as it was hers, so could it in that case be considered a problem?

A question she need not answer, for there at the other end of the shopping arcade on the concourse level of the Dorkery was the shop she'd been looking for, *Les Caves du Rataplan*, and there behind the counter was a fat, ugly, officious shopkeeper, who, when Artemesia entered to the jangling of the bell above the door, looked up from her copy of the *Evening Scoop* and asked in a squeaky, quavering voice, "And how may I help you, my pretty?"

It was Alecto, of course, though Artemesia did not know that, having entered Joe's story too late to have made the acquaintance of the infamous Witch of Decency and chairperson of W.A.R.T., whose daughter was once again hiding, unnoticed by Artemesia, under the witch's capacious skirts.

"I should like to purchase a bottle of Chateau Léthé-Rothschild," said Artemesia, not without a quaver in her own voice.

"Ah," said Alecto, with hypocritical sympathy. "I sense that you have known deep sorrow in your life."

"Not yet, but I expect to. Please, it's not a matter I care to discuss."

"I understand, my dear. I too have known love—and disappointment. Well, there is no better remedy for a broken heart than this." Alecto reached beneath the counter and produced a bottle of Chateau Léthé-Rothschild 2967.

Or so Alecto supposed. In fact, unknown to the witch, her daughter had substituted another bottle, identically labeled but filled, by her own murderous little hands, with deadly cyanide!

"Here you are, my pretty. But a word of caution. Do not drink this wine in company with one whose memory you would continue to cherish. Any toast drunk in Chateau Léthé-Rothschild will produce an instant and reciprocal oblivion in those who share it."

"Yeth," Coughdrop whispered to herself in the darkness of her mother's skirts. "The oblivion of inthant death!"

"Thank you," said Artemesia. She paid for the bottle of wine with three worn hundred-thousand-dollar bills and left the wine shop.

When they were alone Coughdrop crawled out from under her mother's skirts. She mounted the little stepladder that allowed her to look over her mother's shoulder at the picture of Joe and Artemesia printed on the front page of the *Evening Scoop*. Under the picture a caption read, "Love Is Big Winner at Tournament of Poses."

"Ooo," said Coughdrop, wrinkling her tiny face into a mask of grotesque rage, "she thinkth she'th tho thpeical. I could juth thpit!"

"There, there, my precious, don't be upset," said Alecto. "You shall have him back to be your bridegroom. Have I ever broken a promise to you? By midnight tonight he will be yours."

Coughdrop stamped on the floor with her tiny hobnailed boots. "It'th all my fault! I enthortholed the wrong victim. I should be thpanked. I should be theverely punished. I am a monthter, a monthter of wickedneth!"

"You are no such thing," said Alecto with maternal complacency, turning back to her newspaper. "You are my own sweet little dwarfchild, with the voice of a night-ingle and the eyes of an enchantress. And tonight you will marry the man of your choice, or I am not the Witch of Decency. Now, off with you. Go read your book, or play with your dolls."

"Yeth, Mother."

Obediently little Coughdrop returned to the back of the wine shop, where all the preparations had been made for the execution of Miss Lavinia Simpkins. Miss Simpkins had been found guilty of the crimes of Talking Back, Disrespect, and Nihilism, and all the responsibility for her execution had fallen on Coughdrop's deformed little shoulders.

First she must tie Miss Simpkins's hands behind her with heavy-duty nylon thread.

Then she must blindfold her with a Sterile Adhesive Strip.

And then she must chop off her dear curly head with an ax!

"Pleathe," begged Miss Simpkins, who shared with Coughdrop an inability to pronounce the letter S. "Thpare me! Thpare me, for pity'th thake!"

"Not on your thweet life, thithter!" said Coughdrop.

Whereupon, with a single merciless stroke of the Plays-Kool "Queen Mary" Professional Head-Chopper, Coughdrop severed the head of the unfortunate doll, which rolled across the floor of the wine shop, blinking its lifeless eyes open and closed, open and closed, and open.

"And good riddanthe!"

Chapter Eighteen

TV in Dreamland

When he had landed at the bottom of the long black hole that led to the Land of Dreams, Joe woke up, or thought he did, and shook his head, and tried to remember where he was. For a while he thought he was in the day care center where he'd grown up, and then it seemed he was in his room in the Dyer Street Residence Hotel. But that couldn't be, since there wouldn't be a vase of roses by his bed in either of those places. Or a newspaper either, for that matter, since so far as he knew he was still an illiterate. Something prompted him to pick up the paper anyhow, and there on the front page was a picture of him and the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. They were kissing. Under the picture were words, and the first of the words—which he could read!—was Love.

He didn't have to read further. It all came back, all except for what he'd said to Artemesia in his delirium and what she'd said to him.

I must be in a hospital, he told himself, and since that was a reasonable, even reassuring, proposition he stopped worrying and tried to read the headline of the *Evening Scoop*, which, with only a bit of brow-wrinkling and lip-puckering, he was able to do. The headline said:

TOP DOC'S TESTS PROVE
WE LIVE AFTER D**TH

That seemed such wonderfully and unexpectedly good news that Joe wanted to kiss the newspaper. To think that all his life he'd been worrying about just this question, what happened when a person dies, and now Science had the answer. And he'd never have known about it if he hadn't learned to read!

However, reading is a tiresome business, even when what we get to read is so reassuring. So rather than deal with the small print that would have explained something about the kind of life we can expect to live once we're dead, Joe decided to watch tv. He took the remote control bleeper from the table by his bed and bleeped on the tv.

At once the withered, ingratiating face of Alistair Cooke appeared—not in a rerun from a thousand years ago, as you might first suppose, but in a live broadcast from the studios of Channel 13. Thanks to the wonders of modern science, Alistair Cooke was still legally and medically alive, as was the guest he was introducing, none other than the English poet and novelist D. M. Thomas, who, Cooke announced, was now going to read from his epic poem, *The Phantom of the Octopus*. Strictly speaking, *The Phantom of the Octopus* was not—as a trickle of small type across the bottom of the screen explained, if you could read it—a poem by D. M. Thomas, but it was one he *liked* tolerably well and had published, with a similar tiny disclaimer, in the latest of his more than four thousand books, as Volume Three of his tetralogy *Finders Keepers*.

At the first sight of the poet's millennium-old face, Joe tried to switch to another channel, but the tv would no longer respond to his bleeper. D. M. Thomas grinned one gruesome, sepulchral grin, and then his eyes rolled to the back of his head so that only the whites were showing, and he read off his own internal teleprompter the following extract from Canto One of *The Phantom of the Octopus*:

One day like this when I was going mad
With boredom and anxiety and had
Begun to type up lists of every poem
I'd writ or borrowed since the Sack of Rome,
And every article, and every story
(For there is nothing like an inventory
To get the wheels to turn and cogs to grind
In the abandoned factory of the mind),
I had an odd experience: to wit,
An octopus attacked me. One minute it

Did not exist, the next its arms were wound
Around me like some wife you think you've
drowned

Who then comes dripping, draped in kelp, to urge
You to confess. Her reeking kisses scourge
Your flesh, you scream, you promise her you'll go
To the police, but she won't stop: just so
Each of an octopus's suckers grips
One's hands or feet or shoulder blades or lips,
And one is helpless to resist the beast—
Such was my own experience, at least
"This isn't happening to me," I thought.
"This is some allegory I've been caught
Inside of. I'm my ego and this squid
An externalization of my id,
Who's bent on his base pleasure willy-nilly.
I guess I should repress him. Aren't dreams silly?"

"Yes," Joe shouted at the tv screen in some distress. "Yes, they are. So would you please shut the f*ck up!"

But the blank-eyed poet ignored him, in exactly the way the poem described being ignored by the octopus:

My enemy, in face of these and other
Cogencies, ignored them, as a mother
Might turn a deaf ear to her darling baby's
Terrors when he gets a shot for rabies;
The giant hypodermic prods his spine—
Just so, the octopus's beak nipped mine.
I writhed, and as I writhed I wondered why
People are born and live a while and die,
If at the end of all of life's confusions
They are devoured by their own Delusions—
For that, I now believed, and not my id,
Was what was represented by the squid.
Or else, maybe, it symbolized the black
Depression that had settled on me back
In '54—or was it '45?—
Since which time I've been only half-alive
(Shades of the prison-house, and all that live).
Although as someone else has said, better a
Acre in Middlesex than *et cetera*.
I mean, so I'm depressed—aren't all of us?
Gloom I could bear, but not that octopus.

"Stop it!" Joe screamed at the tv. Usually he did not have such a violent reaction to television programs, even those on Channel 13, which, admittedly, he seldom tuned to. But then usually he was able to change channels or at the very least leave the room, whereas here, in Dreamland, there was no escaping from the ancient, cadaverous poet and his insane poem.

Which continued:

Then, as I strangled and despaired, a knock
Announced a visitor, which, like a Braque
Amid Kandinskys, tended to restore
My will to live and strive and look at more
Oils and gouaches. I strained against those ropes
Of living glue with reawakened hopes

And lurched toward the door. Due however
 To a plethora of coils my brave endeavor
 Failed. I fell into my television,
 Shattering the screen upon collision.
 Shards of thin glass transpierced the soft pink head
 Of my cephalopodous foe, which bled
 And turned translucent and a little scary
 Like the raspberry elephants and cherry
 Whales in old advertisements for Jell-O.

"I'll turn it off *manually*!" Joe vowed in exasperation.
 But his legs were knotted into the bedsheets in such a
 way that he couldn't get out of either side of the bed.

Still the dread poet droned on; still the inexorable
 epic continued:

The squid was dead, and now a cheery "Hello!"
 Resounded through the living room. My guest,
 Saluting me with his cigar, addressed
 Me so: "You disappoint me, dearest boy.
 Do not you recognize me? I am Joy—
 Known to Americans as Doctor Brothers,
 As Sigmund Freud or Wilhelm Reich to others.
 But whether Brothers, Freud, or Reich's my name,
 The pleasures that I offer are the same."
 Wherewith he sucked upon his black cheroot,
 Gave it to me, and bade me follow suit.
 Before, however, I could take one puff
 A pain lanced through my heart profound enough
 To seem the summary of all life's gripes
 And migraines, aches and anguishes. "Yipes!"
 I cried—and it was gone. Freud pointed at
 The broken screen with his cigar. "It's that!
 The phantom of the octopus has wound
 An ectoplasmic tentacle around
 Your soul, in consequence of which you'll
 never get
 Quite well until you find a way to sever it."
 "Could you—" "I'm sorry, but there's nothing I
 Can do—unless perhaps you'd like to lie
 Here in my lap and talk about it. Why
 Not start when you were ten. Nine. Eight.
 Relax, let go, and free-associate."

With the energy of total rejection Joe ripped the confin-
 ing sheets down the middle. At the same moment the
 image on the screen shuddered and changed from color
 to black-and-white, and the poet's voice was stilled. A
 ghost image appeared to the right of the image of the
 ever-reading poet, but it was not an image of D. M.
 Thomas.

It was, instead, the ghost of Enzo di Vita!

"Hey, kid, I saw your act. You were okay."

"Enzo, is that you? Can you hear me? Are you all right?"

"I could be worse. Purgatory's a little like the pen.

You know you'll get out some day, and there's a chance
 of time off for good behavior. Which is one reason for
 my elbowing aside old Elbow-Patches here." With his
 thumb Enzo gestured at the poet, whose image had
 grown dimmer as his own became clearer.

"What's the other reason?" Joe asked.

"Hey, kid, I promised, didn't I? Come h'll or high wa-
 ter, I said I'd see you at the Victory Celebration. Well,
 they came, and I'm here. So where's the celebration?"

"I knew you weren't really dead," said Joe. "Cause I
 read in the paper that they've got proof now, Science
 has, that people never completely are dead."

"Don't believe everything you read, kid. But in this
 case it's true enough. Now let's cut the cr*p and get
 down to business. You want that dame to marry you,
 right?"

Joe bristled. "Miss Albatross is not the kind of woman
 I would call a dame."

The ghost sighed. "Time flies, kid. Let us not niggle
 over niceties. You asked her to marry you, right?"

"Right."

"And she hemmed and hawed. Right?"

"She said I was sweet as strawberry ice cream, and
 she said—"

"But she did not say yes to your proposal: yes or no?"

"No."

"Then you've got a problem, kid. Which I intend to
 help you solve. First off, you've got to dress sharp. Your
 get-up at the Tournament was a definite improvement,
 so I'll say no more on that score. Next, don't mention
 marriage again till she's got the hots for you. Meanwhile,
 see that she gets them."

"You mean make out? Believe me, the first chance I
 get—"

"But save the proposal for a romantic moment *after*
 that first chance. Take her to dinner. Then, when the
 candles are burning and you've raised your wineglasses,
 tell her what's in your heart.

"Finally, there is the little problem of your career."

"I don't have a career," said Joe.

"That's the problem. Now, what I would suggest is
 that you offer to accompany the young lady to her home,
 get introduced to her old man, and then invite yourself
 to become a junior partner in the family business. He's
 not going to be leaping at the opportunity, I expect, but
 he owes you a favor."

"How's that?"

"Kid, it was you or Herpes Honker. Any father is go-
 ing to see you as the lesser of those two evils."

Joe ignored Enzo's lack of diplomacy and asked,
 "What sort of family business is it?"

"Kid, I'm only a soul in Purgatory, I don't know all
 the answers. When you meet him you'll find out what
 he does. But whatever that is, his daughter can't com-
 plain she's used to something better. Whereas if you
 continue in your present capacity . . ."

"I understand," said Joe, "and I appreciate all your
 good advice, though I ought to say that I'd thought of
 most of all that myself. Except for your idea about join-
 ing the family business. That's a good one, if he goes for
 it."

"But don't you bank on it. For all I know, the guy's a
 librarian. In which case you'd better develop another
 career goal real quick. And that leads to my last and
 most important suggestion: you have got to get yourself

bonded. Right now. Nobody ever gets anywheres without friends, and there's no friends you can count on like the ones you're bonded to. Or, as they say in the ad for the Troll Mutual Assistance Society:

Beware of fairies, dorks, and elves.
Trolls help trolls who help themselves."

"I thought you were a dork," Joe objected.

"So I was, and proud to have been one. But I remember your own expressed preference when we discussed the matter at Abandoned Hope Lounge. If you're set on becoming a troll, then f*ck it, become a troll. But don't shilly-shally. Do it now."

"Now? But how can I—"

There was a knock on the door, like the knock that goes Knock-Knock-Knock-KNOCK in Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, which is supposed to represent Fate knocking on Beethoven's door.

"Do it *now*," Enzo's ghost insisted, as it vanished from the screen.

Chapter Nineteen

Another Part of the Forest

She had stopped to catch her breath at the top of Pillcock Hill. The sun was declining behind the western wall of Surewould Forest, and slowly, but not so slowly you could not see it happening, the shadow of that high and highly symbolic wall crept up the wall that faced it across the expanse of the forest, darkening the brickwork from sunlit rose to shadowed rust. For one despondent moment Artemesia was tempted to uncork the bottle of Chateau Léthé-Rothschild then and there and phase out all her memories of the day gone by, letting her mind and the forest go dark together.

But that would never do. Quite apart from the debt of gratitude she felt toward Joe, she knew, with that part of her mind still anchored in office routine, that the job she had entered the forest to get done still remained unaccomplished. Joe's destiny and identity must be untangled from Darko Dunkle's, and then—

Ah, but there *was* no "and then"—none that would ever be entered into the databanks of United Avatars. Her duty to Mr. Doe was to provide service to a customer—service with a smile. She remembered the song she had sung along with the other trainees at the United Avatars Training Center, and to ease the pain of melancholy in her heart she sang that song again to no accompaniment but the rustling of the forest's leaves:

Lesson One is dress in style.
Two is service with a smile.
Three is thank you. Four is please.
Five's the hour we take our ease.

When Artemesia came to the end of the song, an echo

from the edge of the now much darker woods repeated, with a tasteful variation, its last sweet cadence.

A moment later that echo stepped forth from the cover of a thick dandelion bush. "Excuse me," said the echo, who was, in fact, a woman in a clinging crimson dress covered with sequins, "if I've startled you. I have been watching you from the shadows for, oh, the longest while. You were so wrapped in your thoughts that I could not disturb you. But when you sang that song, all my scruples were overcome. I could scarcely credit my senses. You see, it was *my* school song, too."

"Oh, you attended UATC?" Artemesia asked politely.

The woman nodded, and her giant red wig bobbed precariously. "Yes, though I never did get a job with United Avatars. I went into advertising instead."

"Mmm-hmm," said Artemesia, not without a note of snobbery.

"That's such a lovely dress you're wearing," said the woman in red.

"Why, thank you." Artemesia glanced down nervously to where the bloodstain had been. Wasn't there, she asked herself again, still the slightest pink tinge that the correction fluid hadn't whited out? "Yours is also very . . . bright and gay." She didn't need to add, "And in the worst possible taste." That was a truth held to be self-evident.

"Oh, it's what I have to wear for my job. You see, I'm the Goddess Fortuna, and I represent the American Tuna Fish Research Bureau. I'd offer you a free sample, but I'm out for the day. But would you mind answering just one or two questions anyhow?"

"I'm sorry, dear, but I don't have a moment to spare. I'm still on duty, though to see me sitting here mooning, you'd never think so, I daresay."

"Oh, please. It's more for my own curiosity than for the Tuna Fish Research Bureau."

Artemesia gave a sigh of permission.

"Are you kind as you are fair?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"That's from a song. Surely you know it: *Who is Sylvia? What is she, that all our swains commend her?* Are you? Kind as you are fair, that is."

"Perhaps," said Artemesia coolly, "we'd be better off with some Tuna Fish Bureau questions."

"It's not a *meaningless* question," the Goddess Fortuna protested earnestly. "It's asking whether someone who's very beautiful is also able to love other people. Whether beauty and love are necessarily related. And the song goes on to answer its own question. It says that beauty lives with kindness. But I wonder sometimes, does it? And I thought that you would probably know. You think I'm being fresh, don't you?"

"I think you presume too far," said Artemesia, whose coolness had turned to frost, "but 'fresh' is not the word I'd have picked."

"Oh, yes, I know, I'm drab, especially this time of day. But as to my presuming, surely Surewould Forest is where we can speak in candor. Where, in a way, we're even obliged to. So let me presume further. Have you ever met someone for whom you felt a completely inex-

plicable attraction? Not that they were blindingly beautiful or dazzlingly intelligent or anything like that. Just that you had to be near them, you had to look at them, you had to touch—"

"Miss Fortuna," Artemesia began in a chastening tone. Then, without warning, her voice seized up and her eyes brimmed with tears, even as her cheeks darkened with blushes for the misunderstanding she was certain this display would give rise to.

"Please don't be *upset*," said the Goddess, snapping open a fan and holding it up before her face in alarm. "If you'd rather just name a brand of tuna fish, that would be okay. I never meant to wound your feelings."

Artemesia forced herself to stop crying. "To answer your questions: Yes, I have felt such an attraction to someone. I am feeling it now, in fact, and I wish I were not. But I must add, my dear Goddess, that you are not the source of that attraction. If that makes me seem unkind . . ."

"Oh, goodness, no!"

"As to the first question you posed, I am *not* kind as I am fair. Indeed I am not."

This self-accusation released more, and more bitter, tears. Artemesia turned from the Goddess and ran, stumblingly, down the path to the foot of Pillicock Hill, just as the shadow of the forest's western wall touched the brim of the eastern wall and filled all Surewood Forest with a premature dusk.

Heedless of where her steps would take her, half-blinded by her tears, Artemesia entered upon a dense plantation of willows. "Artemesia," the trees called after her in childlike voices. "Tarry a while. Artemesia, whither dost thou hasten? Artemesia! Pause, think—linger with us and look into our leaves."

Trees don't talk, she told herself, though it was hard to resist the evidence of her senses. In any case, if it were not the trees, then it was her enzymes that were saying to her, Whoa! You're moving too fast, you're losing control. Whoa!

"That's better," the willows soothed. "Easy does it. Slow but steady wins the race."

"Oh, shut up, you stupid trees."

"Hush!" said the willows. "Hush! Hush!" Their thin, cool leaves brushed her face, hungry for data, like the fingers of a blind woman.

Unable to resist their repeated urgings, Artemesia came to a standstill and raised her hands to her face, pressing her splayed fingers to her forehead to betoken slow, steady, race-winning thoughtfulness.

"That's it," the willows encouraged her. "A mulch isn't loam in a day, and haste makes waste, which nobody can deny. Be calm. Consider the willows of the grove. Listen to the water rippling in the brook. In the brook, that is. Now . . . how are you feeling? Calmer?"

"Yes," she told the trees. "Much calmer."

"You see," sighed the willows, a bit complacently, "sometimes Nature can supply a remedy. Now that you're calmer, you must *think*. You must formulate a clear *goal*. That's what we do. Our goal is growth. What is yours? Take your time, there's no hurry. Think. Sink

into the grass. Become one with the hum and the twitter. Let the water in the pond grow still, and as it clears, in its silvered surface picture . . . what you will."

She looked into a pond and saw not her own reflection but a computer simulation of Joe's. These were not, however, the lips that had melted her heart like ore in a furnace, nor the eyes that had chewed up her defenses like an oil-drilling rig. She could imagine this face waking to the light of yet another common day and seeming another face entirely from the face that had been, however briefly, a source of such glorious devastation.

It wasn't fair that mere circumstance should be so much in control of anyone's life. Such potential deserved realization. Or, in words of one syllable: *Joe ought to have a chance to grow*.

Did that mean she was surrendering to love? No.

Did that mean she was going to do anything foolish? No, though she might have to move through unofficial channels.

Did that mean a tumble in the hay before, perforce, they raised their glasses in a final toast of Chateau L  th   Rothschild 2967?

Before she could assess that likelihood, the stillness of the pond and the hush of the grove were broken by the sound of a woman's scream. What now? thought Artemesia, annoyed to be summoned to someone else's story, for one never knew how long these interpolated chapters might stretch on. Never mind that she was here on official United Avatars business; the Big Bowl was no respecter of any individual's dramatic unities. One's own plot was forever grinding to a halt while some perfect stranger's story rumbled into motion, like a car waiting at a crossing for a freight train to go by, and the firmest personal vectors were not proof against the glittering eye of some ancient mariner.

Blessedly, *this* was not to be one of those interpolations. When Artemesia had followed the scream to its source, she found the Goddess Fortuna, already recovered from her fright and looking a little embarrassed. And there, swaying back and forth and mumbling into his sparse, scruffy beard, was both the cause of Fortuna's fright and the object of Artemesia's search, Darko Dunkle, the biker whose identity Joe had assumed and whose wits Coughdrop had addled.

In a dry, cracked voice the bewitched biker repeated the nonsense curse, which had disintegrated, like a record too often scraped by the dulllest of needles, into a jabberwocky of meaningless phrases, some still rhyming but all devoid of reason: "In eels of thought Mayan's argot. Comedian, hence; my Bray commence."

"How awful," said Fortuna, unfolding her sequined fan before her face to pantomime her horror.

"How fortunate, however," said Artemesia, in a tone of professional competence, "that I did not arrive any later. A few minutes more, and this poor man might have suffered irreparable brain damage." She unwrapped the entertainment pin from the rose leaf in which Joe had folded it and approached Loser.

All unawares, the biker raved on: "May Bella shine. Too tough my balls, my censored roles."

Deftly Artemesia plucked out Joe's pin from Loser's ear. Then, stretching the earlobe down to make insertion easier, she fitted what she thought was his own pin through the pierced flesh.

Loser fell silent. He stopped swaying back and forth. He just stood there stock still, staring emptily into space. "That pin you put in must be a dud," commented the Goddess.

"But I don't see how. When Joe took it out of *his* ear—"

Only then did Artemesia remember that moment of camaraderie at the Mud Puddle Club when D**th had inserted his dead daughter's pin into Joe's ear. She had been monitoring that moment, and was therefore as much to blame as Joe for taking away the wrong pin.

"Oh, dear," she said, and then as the consequences of her blunder dawned on her: "Oh, d'mn!"

"Let me help," said the Goddess Fortuna, snapping her fan closed in a manner that signified, to those who understood the language of fans, her total availability for any purpose.

"What?"

"You've got a problem. Whatever it is, let me help you."

Artemesia felt uneasy at the Goddess's too ardent good will, yet her offer of help could not have come more opportunely. For if Artemesia were to get Joe over the wall, by way of helping him to grow—which was the decision she'd come to under the willows—then she could not have any further direct interaction with him till he'd got to the other side of the wall under his own steam. It was a rule she'd have willingly broken, if it had been possible to hoodwink the United Avatars computer. But it wasn't.

What's more, Joe would never be able to go over the wall while his circuits were still crossed with Darko Dunkle's. Ergo, Dunkle and Joe had to be untangled first. And since Dunkle could not be left in his present comatose state, with a dud pin in his ear and his consciousness swimming in the void, that meant that Joe's pin must be used to march him back to where Joe lay asleep in his hospital bed so the exchange of pins could be effected there.

All this Artemesia explained to the attentive Goddess, who agreed to act as guide-dog to the hapless biker.

The dud pin was replaced with Joe's, and Loser's weaselly features twitched into consciousness. He began to drone anew: "Anon then, earth; I saw thee, hearse."

"I'm afraid," said Artemesia, "he will not be a pleasant traveling companion."

"Actually," said the Goddess, "he's kind of interesting. I've never known anyone whose mind had collapsed so completely before. Not and keep functioning narratively."

"Ah, yes, speaking of narrative, I'd best do this now." She plunged the dud pin through Loser's other earlobe.

"Read verse!" he shrieked. "Read verse, you curs!"

"Now don't you make the same mistake I did," Artemesia warned the Goddess. "*This* pin is Joe's, and *this* is the dud. Once the exchange is made, Loser should slide right back into his own storyline without any perceptible discontinuity. That's why I thought he should have Gonorrhil's pin too, since she's pertinent to *his* story, not to Joe's."

"Gonorrhil?" echoed the Goddess. "What a strange name."

"It's from Shakespeare, I think. Anyhow, this is so kind of you. Thank you so much. I realize you were probably just about to go off duty."

"Don't mention it. This kind of job is so much more interesting than asking questions about tuna fish. Besides, I haven't clocked out, so I'll be getting overtime. This is official United Avatars business, right? And I'm acting as your deputy. So it's all on the up and up."

"Still, it's very good of you."

After the Goddess had led Loser off into the darkening woods, Artemesia shrugged off the straps of her Qiana shift and unfurled the pinions of her imagination, which had seemed, beneath the loose folds of the shift, to be no more than shoulder blades. Then, with a sharp, falconish cry, she sprang into the air and mounted higher and higher, in a widening gyre, toward—and across—the wall surrounding Surewould Forest.

Chapter Twenty

The Power of Trolldom

After Fate or whoever had knocked on his door a second time, Joe told him to come in. The knob turned, the door swung open, and footsteps crossed the room toward the bed—but there was no visible person to attach to the footsteps.

"Hello?" said Joe.

"Hello," replied a deep, rumbling, confidential voice, such as you hear on tv advertising the most serious and expensive products, cars or life insurance or a new president. "I have come to conduct you to your rite of passage."

"Oh," said Joe, who had no idea what a rite of passage was. "Would you mind if I asked you what—"

"You must ask no questions."

"Okay," said Joe. He tried to think of a way to relate conversationally to his invisible visitor that would not take the form of a question, but he couldn't, so he didn't say anything more.

"Follow me," said the voice.

Joe got out of bed and, realizing he had no clothes on, quickly wrapped the ripped bedsheet around his waist, bath towel-style. Then he followed the footsteps as they passed out of the room and along a narrow, poorly lit corridor. Fortunately, his invisible guide had metal cleats on the heels of his shoes, so it wasn't that hard to follow him.

Water oozed from the stone walls like sweat, and somewhere far off there was a low wheezing sound that put Joe in mind of the furnace in the sub-basement of the Dyer Street Residence Hotel, a furnace that had always produced, on the coldest winter days, more in the way of noise than of heat.

The footsteps stopped in front of a door that opened with a creak and closed, after Joe had gone inside, with another. Or was he outside? He couldn't tell. The mist curling up through the dimness about him offered no

clue. Dreams are often like that, vague and indefinite, or even contradictory, like instructions for assembling a model airplane manufactured in Hong Kong.

"Welcome," said the voice of his invisible guide, "to Trolldom. Please state your name and purpose."

"My name is Joe Doe and . . ." Did he have a purpose? In the long run, certainly, it was to marry Artemesia. But that didn't seem relevant to right now. "Right now," he said, remembering Enzo's advice, "I'd like to be bonded as a troll."

"Please look into the camera," said the voice.

"The camera? Where—" Then he remembered the rule not to ask questions. "Right, the camera." He directed his gaze more to the right and smiled at an imaginary camera. Almost he asked, "Is this better?" but caught himself in time.

"Please complete the following jingle: 'Beware of fairies, dorks, and elves.'"

"'Trolls help trolls who help themselves.'"

"The candidate shall raise his right hand."

Joe raised his right hand. The light in the space around him got brighter, and he could see through the swirls of mist a number of little glimmering lights that formed a ring around him, as though he were standing in the middle of an immense birthday cake surrounded by candles.

"Do you renounce the power of flight, which is the power of untrammelled imagination?"

"I do," said Joe.

At once he felt wings being torn from the bones of his shoulders.

"Do you renounce the power of piracy, which is the power of remorseless wrongdoing?"

"I do," said Joe.

Something sudden and wholly unpleasant happened in the general area of his liver, which he knew could never be undone. Just as surely as he knew that the ghost of Enzo di Vita would never appear to him again.

"Do you renounce the power of reason, which is the power of joy denied?"

"I do, forever and ever," said Joe.

As a result of which, he felt no sensation whatsoever, which makes sense if you think about it.

"Do you embrace the power of Trolldom, which is the power of Loyalty and Love?"

"I do," said Joe.

"Then shall you see all Trolldom reflected in your own heart."

At once the space around him grew bright, and Joe could see that what had seemed only the burning of birthday candles was the burning and pulsing of hundreds of beating hearts, the hearts of his fellow trolls, till now invisible, who had assembled to judge him and possibly to welcome him into their brotherhood.

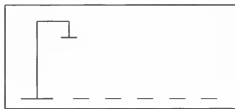
By the light of these burning hearts Joe was able to see in the space immediately before him three caskets. One casket was fashioned of gold, one of silver, and one of lead.

"Choose," said the voice.

It was an easy choice. He pointed to the casket of lead. The gold and silver caskets winked out of existence.

"This is your question," said the voice. "Listen carefully; it will not be repeated." There was a dramatic silence, broken by the faint sound of an invisible envelope being torn open.

A screen sprang up before Joe from the mists underfoot. A gallows appeared upon the screen. At the base of the gallows five blank spaces appeared. It looked like this:



"One hundred people surveyed were asked, 'What feature does a man first notice in a woman to whom he is attracted?' You have fifteen seconds to answer. Think!"

"Oh," said Joe, as in "Oh, that's an impossible question." For how could he explain Artemesia's beauty to someone who hadn't appreciated it directly?

On the screen an O appeared over the second blank.

"Oh," said Joe again, but this time it was an "oh" of comprehension, as in "Oh, *now* I get it."

On the screen another O appeared. The screen now looked like this:



Suddenly, intuitively, beyond all doubt, Joe knew the answer. "B," he said, "and B again." When those two B's appeared within their proper spaces, he finished the riddle off with its final letter, "S." The two O's together, and the B's, each by each, and even the S were all images of Artemesia's beautiful breasts, of all breasts, of breastliness itself.

A bell rang.

"You have answered," said the voice, "without error or hesitation. The casket thereby stands unlocked. Its⁴ contents are yours."

As Joe lifted the lid of the lead casket, the hearts about him burned more brightly, and the voices of the Ambrosian Chorus—for it was they who had assembled here in the Land of Dreams to welcome Joe to their mystic confraternity—swelled in a mighty anthem:

A crown there is with magic powers
To lengthen minutes into hours.

From the casket Joe removed a cirque of glimmering silverness and placed it, wreathlike, wraithlike, about his brow.

A ring there is, as well, which lends
Strength to the hand that serves its ends.

Onto the middle finger of his right hand Joe snugged the small golden glimmering of a ring, which, the moment he made a fist to admire it, vanished from sight.

A troll who would achieve full growth
Should raise his hand and take our oath.

Joe raised his right hand and took the oath that made him completely and forever a troll, but the exact words of that oath can't be revealed here, since they are a secret limited to initiated members of Trolldom.

There were other secrets revealed to Joe after he'd taken the oath, which similarly can't be divulged here, such as the exact nature of the trolls' secret handshake, which seems so much like an ordinary handshake but which allows trolls to recognize each other instantly.

In general, however, I am permitted to reveal that the characteristic and identifying feature of a troll is his or her *inconspicuousness*. While dorks and fairies and even, because of their white collars, elves can be recognized at a glance, sometimes from a considerable distance, trolls make no big deal about their trollishness. They wear blue jeans to places where other people mostly wear blue jeans, and suits and dresses where people mostly dress like that. You would never say of any troll that he or she was fashionable, but neither would you think them out of fashion. Trolls are ordinary, and they do it without any effort, unlike dorks or fairies or elves, who can only *achieve* ordinariness with effort. In short, trolls are what democracy is all about.

That does not mean that everyone in the year 2992 who was not a fairy or a dork or an elf was automatically a troll. No, Trolldom was a very select society. Not just anyone could be a member, in the same way that nowadays not just anyone can be a Rotarian or a Weight-Watcher or a Hassidic Jew. To be sure, not everyone wanted to be a troll, since the failure rate of candidates attempting the rite of passage was more than fifty percent, and it was considered a source of deep shame—albeit a secret shame—to have tried to become a troll and been turned away. *Why bother?* seemed to be the attitude of most people in the year 2992, just as it is today, and so they were never bonded. And never being bonded, they never learned the answer to the question *Why bother?* which is *Belonging*. People who have a sense of belonging understand its significance, but it can't be explained to those who lack it. So I won't try to do that here. I will only point out that Joe now belonged to Trolldom and was a part of it, and that suited him down to the ground.

Since it is not permitted to reveal any more of what transpired at Joe's initiation, let us return from the Land of Dreams to the moment that Joe, back in bed, was awakened by the ringing of his telephone. He looked about for his stovepipe hat, which he found by the foot of the bed with Artemesia's second arrow still skewering it from front to back. While the phone went on ringing

inside the hat, Joe debated whether to take out the arrow, since it was kind of show-offy, or keep it as a souvenir of his meeting Artemesia. He decided to keep it, and answered the phone.

"You're there," said Artemesia. "I was beginning to worry."

"About me?" said Joe, delighted to be worried about.

"Have you been resting?"

"I was sound asleep and having a terrific dream the moment you rang."

"Really? What about?"

"The dream? I can't remember a bit of it now." That was not quite true, but Joe had taken a solemn vow not to reveal the secret wisdom of Trolldom, so this was one of those exceptional cases where a lie can honestly be called white. "But it was nice. How are you? Did you get my pin? Can I take you to dinner tonight?"

"I'm fine. A little overwrought still, but there's a steam-bub tub waiting for me the minute I put down the phone. The reason I called is to tell you that you're still wearing Loser's pin. The one you gave me was a dud. But don't worry. A friend of mine is bringing Loser to you, and she should be there before too much longer. Her name is Fortuna."

"The Goddess Fortuna?"

"You've met her already?"

"I still have the can of tuna fish she gave me in my hat. What about dinner?"

"I'd love to."

"Terrific. Where would you like to go? I, uh, don't know many restaurants in *this* area."

"Why not the Parking Lot Cafe?"

"Oh, just because we've got the one voucher for a free dinner there, that's no reason. I want to go somewhere romantic."

"The Parking Lot Cafe is *very* romantic. You'll see."

"Well, that's settled, then. What time do you want me to pick you up?"

"How about seven? That'll give us time for a drink."

"Fine, fine. At your place, right?"

"Right."

When she didn't say any more, he asked, "Where is it?" and when she answered and told him her address a shiver of pure pleasure ran up and down his body like the hands of a famous pianist zipping up and down the keyboard.

"I'll be there," he promised, "at seven."

"One last thing, Joe, You can't leave Surewould Forest by the main exit. If you do, all this will come to an end. You'll have to find another way to the other side of the wall, a way out that's not an official exit where you have to surrender your pin. But I can't tell you more than that. You'll have to handle the rest of it without my help."

"Okay. I will. And . . . Artemesia?"

"Yes?"

"I love you."

To which she replied in words so soft and low there was no way to know what she had said, though Joe believed it must have been "I love you too," and indeed, that is what she had said the moment before she hung

up, although what Joe didn't know was that as she said it, she was thinking she would probably never see him again.

For the longest time Joe sat there in the bed with the phone in his hands, thinking of Artemesia and repeating her address like a prayer: "21 West 21st. 21 West 21st."

Then, in the control room, many stories above the cell that he inhabited, a page was turned, and Joe was propelled into a new and much less wholesome chapter.

Chapter Twenty-One

Pussy Dumping

Without even knocking, D**th barged into Joe's room, his middle finger raised in greeting, his fly open and his c**k hanging out. It was of average size. "Hey there, little bro, that was some f*ck'ng show you put on," he bellowed amiably.

At the cue of D**th, whom Loser had so long thought to be his father, Loser's pin was triggered and Joe's head popped gears. All he could think to say, as the Wild F*ck-'ng Animals gathered around his bed, was, "Oh, hi."

"We thought you'd be getting you some p'ssy," said F*ck, looking about the bare room wistfully. "We thought they might even be some leavings for us."

Joe's jaw dropped at the idea that his love and devotion for Artemesia could be seen by F*ck or anyone else as no more than a need for p'ssy. Then it dropped a notch further as that idea swelled into a trumpet call direct from the planet's core summoning him to love, devotion, *and* p'ssy, all three in one, just like the name of the famous sewing machine oil, Three-in-One.

While Joe's jaw was hanging open, C'nt—from a considerable distance away—pinged a large red pill right to the back of his throat, where it stuck. C'nt applauded his marksmanship by popping a couple of the pills into his own mouth.

Joe was able to convey mutely that the pill was stuck in his throat, and P'ss offered him a bottle of amber fluid. "Here, wash it down with some of this p'ss."

Hoping that what P'ss had said was just a figure of speech, Joe took a swallow from the bottle. "Bleh!" he commented, once the liquid had eased the pill down his throat. "What in h'll was that?"

"Just some plain Ol' Gallowbird," P'ss explained, "with some of that mushroom stuff that T'ts boiled up."

"Here," said N*k*, plunging a double-inhaler up Joe's nostrils, "take a snort of this. It'll blow your head off."

"What the f*ck," said Joe, sliding down the steep grade into Loser's day-to-day lifestyle. "You only live once, right?"

"Right," said D**th. "So try it all, fly away, die young, and enjoy yourself."

Just as N*k* had said, Joe's head was blown off by whatever had been in the inhaler. C'nt caught it, dribbled it on the floor, and passed it in a trick behind-the-back pass to P'ss, who fumbled it and proceeded to pass it down the foot of the bed.

F*ck scooped Joe's head off the floor and set it spinning on his middle finger. Meanwhile Joe's heart performed a drum solo in that ultra-progressive style that sounds like not a lot more than bursts of slowed-down static, unless you are either inside the drum or inside the head of the drummer. Then, as the solo wobbled into synch with the world around it, Joe's head returned to his shoulders. D**th was slapping his back, as though he'd been choking. Joe held his hand up to signal that he was all right, and D**th laid off.

"So what do you say?" said D**th.

"About what?"

"Are we going to Tarantula Jack's or not?"

"What the f*ck," said Joe. "Why not?"

"What the f*ck," F*ck agreed.

And so they all set off for Tarantula Jack's except for P'ss, who was spread across the bed like a final exam problem in Advanced Dry Cleaning.

Joe had not gone very far down the corridor, however, before he realized that he wasn't wearing anything, not even the ripped bedsheet he'd taken to the Land of Dreams. Except for his stovepipe hat, of course, for he was never without that.

"Hey, I don't have any *clothes*!"

C'nt darted a suspicious sideways look at him.

"Where's my f*ck'ng clothes?" Joe demanded, and C'nt, who'd been wondering if Joe was a f*gg't, looked satisfied, for the time being. You've always got to remember, when you're a biker, that if a noun doesn't have another adjective then you must use "f*ck'ng."

"Listen, little bro," said D**th, jabbing at his gums with a splintered matchstick and grimacing thoughtfully. "If you want to dress up in a f*ck'ng show-white suit for the f*ck'ng Tournament, that's f*ck'ng show business, and it's okay with me. You won, so we're proud of you as f*ck'ng punch. Right, bro?"

The Wild F*ck'ng Animals murmured various obscenities of grudging assent.

"But when you're back on track with the Animals, you dress like an Animal. So here"—he tossed Joe a small brown clothing egg—"are your new f*ck'ng colors. Fly 'em with some f*ck'ng pride."

Joe cracked open the egg and gasped at the stench of the denim-spandex clothing as it slowly expanded to human size. "But these clothes belong to Sh't," Joe objected weakly. "Don't they?"

"Sh't ain't with us no more," C'nt explained. "There was a small f*ck'ng altercation in the f*ck'ng Dorkery, when some f*ck'ng sports fan suggested that you weren't going to get your f*ck'ng Chopper started."

"Whereupon," F*ck continued, reaching into the pocketless pocket-hole of his jeans to scratch his crotch dreamily, "Sh't hit the f*ck'ng fan, and the marshals arrested him for f*ck'ng assault."

"And f*ck'ng battery," concluded N*k*, "for which he will get five to fifteen f*ck'ng years, depending on whether the f*ck'ng's teeth were extracted or just loosened up."

"I'm sorry to hear that," said Joe.

"You win some, you lose some," said D**th. "And since it looks right now like *you* are on a winning streak,

it don't make no sense us calling you Loser no more. So . . ."

D**th did not have to spell it out. The four letters on the front of Joe's new jacket did that. The first letter was an S, and the second was an H, which together produce a different sound than either S or H sounds like by itself. For S, Joe remembered clearly, was for Suffer, and H was a H**ker who works for a p'mp. But put them together and they stand for Sh*t, which was what his new clothes smelled like as well as how his new name was spelled, which shows there is a lesson to be learned even from experiences that seem at first to be entirely negative.

No sooner had Joe snugged on his ragged new jeans and unstuck his jacket so as to get his arms through the holes than the bikers rounded a bend of the corridor and debouched upon a kind of vest-pocket park where three aged nuns were supervising a group of schoolgirls playing a game of Pussy Dumping.

"Pussy pussy dumping!" shrielled all the schoolgirls in chorus, as they spun around and around in blindfolds.

Pussy pussy dumping,
The cat ran up a plum tree;
Half a crown
To fetch her down—
Pussy pussy dumping!

One of the older girls, who had been allotted the role of Pussy, fell to the grass and began rolling toward the Wild F*ck'ng Animals, who looked on with admiration and perhaps some pang of regret for the loss of their own childhood innocence. After a great deal of rolling, "Pussy" came to a stop at Joe's feet. She leapt up and, still blindfolded, sang out:

Fiddle-de-dee, fiddle-de-dee!
The wasp has married the bumblebee!
Puss came fiddling out of the barn,
A pair of bagpipes under her arm.
One for Johnnie—and one for me!

With a final, gleeful *Fiddle-de-dee!* the little charmer whipped off her blindfold and presented it to Joe. "Now," she said, not without coyness, "*you must be Pussy.*"

As we've seen, Joe was usually willing to go along with whatever seemed to be expected of him, so, handing C*nt his stovepipe hat, he allowed himself to be blindfolded. Then, while the schoolgirls chanted their ancient rime, which goes all the way back to A.D. 1600 if not before, he rolled across the grass until, to the sound of girlish laughter, he came up short against the high-button shoes of Sister Mary Immaculata of the Order of Holy Goodness.

"Goodness me," said Sister Mary Immaculata, with a perfectly sincere smile, "and *who* have we here, pray tell? Or, rather, I should say: *whom* have we here?"

Joe thought a moment, and then thought another moment, and then he said, "I *was* Pussy, but now *you* must be!"

And while the schoolgirls clapped their hands, he hand-

ed Sister Mary Immaculata the blindfold and headed on to Tarantula Jack's with the rest of the Animals.

"F*c'k'ng h'll," said N*k*, trying to j'r'k 'ff as they made their way through the brambles and bushes of the forest. "Wouldn't I have liked to d*p my w*c'k in one of those little j'llygl'ss's! Wouldn't I just!"

"It's just as well you controlled yourself," said D**th, in the tone, which he rarely adopted, of an older brother. "One more indictment like the last one, and we'll lose our f*c'k'ng subsidy."

"Gec," said Joe. "I didn't know you had a f*c'k'ng subsidy. Why is that?"

"Because the Federal F*c'k'ng Government is a c*nt," said C*nt.

"No, seriously," said Joe. "How much do you each get out of it? And what do you have to do in return?"

"We don't *do* a f*c'k'ng thing," said C*nt defensively.

"What do *you* do, c*cks*c'k'?"

"Now, C*nt," chided Death. "Sh't is your bro, so don't make needless f*c'k'ng waves."

He turned to Joe. "We have a subsidy for a number of good f*c'k'ng reasons. One, we are upholding a timeless f*c'k'ng tradition of our f*c'k'ng culture. Bikers go all the way back to the twentieth f*c'k'ng century, and if we weren't carrying the f*c'k'ng flame, who the f*c'k would?"

"Two, we will beat the f*c'k'ng sh't out of any f*c'k'ng government official who doesn't fork over the basic f*c'k'ng wherewithal we require, which is not a whole f*c'k'ng lot.

"Three, we offer an indispensable f*c'k'ng role model for youths of the lower f*c'k'ng classes in this f*c'k'ng country—indispensable not only for the f*c'k'ng self-esteem of guys who would otherwise be nothing but *losers*, but indispensable, even more, for the Federal F*c'k'ng Government itself.

"Which takes us to the fourth and final f*c'k'ng reason, which is that one of the most essential f*c'k'ng aims of government is to organize a cadre of f*c'k'trs tougher than any other bunch of f*c'k'trs around, so that if and when push comes to f*c'k'ng shove, *they* are going to be sh't-scared of *us*. And bikers like us are the largest f*c'k'ng recruitment source for that purpose."

"What he's saying, N*k* chimed in, "is that bikers are a symbol of national pride and part of a whole f*c'k'ng system of deterrents to enemy aggression of proven effectiveness. Right, bro?"

"F*c'k'ng A," agreed D**th.

It seemed to Joe that they'd been walking through Surewould Forest for hours, but he could have been wrong. Ever since his head had been blown off by N*k*'s inhaler his sense of time had been about as dependable as a hundred-thousand-dollar watch. While he walked along, he kept trying to remember what it was that he was supposed to do that he was forgetting, but as soon as he thought he'd remembered it, it slipped away like a fish when you try to catch it with your bare hands.

At last, as the bouillon cube of twilight was starting to make the sky thicken into the soup of night, D**th pointed to a large gray mound looming up ahead of them in the middle of a grove of strangler oaks. It looked just

like a giant termite colony like the kind they have in Africa. "We're there," D**th announced.

Just as D**th spoke a neon sign over the low, burrow-like entrance to the huge mound was switched on. Joe had got so good at reading that he didn't have any trouble reading the sign, especially since the first two words were just what you'd expect them to be, TARANTULA JACK'S, and the third was easy to sound out, TATTOOS.

"Next!" called out a creaky old-man's voice from inside the mound.

"That's you," D**th told Joe.

"But I, uh, haven't had time to, uh, decide. Why doesn't someone else go first?"

C'nt's eyes narrowed. "You scared, c*cks*c*k'?"

"Did I look scared at the f*ck'ng Tournament?" Joe asked in return.

"The kid ain't scared," said F*ck. "He just wants some f*ck'ng advice from his f*ck'ng bros. Right, Sh*t?"

Joe nodded. It would have been more honest to say no, that was not what he wanted, but F*ck had framed the question in such a way that it was hard to give an honest answer without sounding insulting.

"What I'd suggest," said F*ck in a confidential tone, dropping his jeans and twisting sideways to expose his b*t*c*ks, "is f*ck'ng butterflies. They ain't exactly macho, but they give a good f*ck'ng first impression to anyone who's down there working."

"F*ck the f*ck'ng butterflies," said C'nt. "If a f*ck'ng tattoo ain't a f*ck'ng gross-out, what's the f*ck'ng point of it? If I was you, Sh*t, I'd get something like this." He lifted his arm to show an elaborately detailed spread-legged female nude tattooed into his armpit. Under the muff of neatly trimmed hair sprouting from the nude's p'r*v't p'rts was a scroll with C'nt's name on it.

"That suits you okay, C'nt," said N*k*, "but it's debatable whether the point of a tattoo is necessarily to gross people out. Me, I'd say it's more a statement about your f*ck'ng identity. What you want, Sh*t, is a f*ck'ng symbol that expresses your f*ck'ng innermost self." N*k* didn't need to expose any part of himself to illustrate his philosophy of tattooing, since n'd*c**r mushrooms of various sizes were tattooed all over him.

"The simplest thing," said D**th, "is just to get your f*ck'ng name done on the back of your right f*ck'ng hand." He showed his own skull-and-crossbones with the scroll that said, "D**th Before Dishonor." "Plus maybe some kind of little picture to go with it."

"Next!" insisted the voice from within the neon-lighted mound.

"There's no f*ck'ng reason," C'nt pointed out, "why he can't take all our f*ck'ng advice. After the first hundred f*ck'ng grand the subsidy will cover the entire f*ck'ng cost. Tattooing is a Major F*ck'ng Medical expense."

Since C'nt's suggestion eliminated the need to develop entrenched positions, the Animals agreed that this was undoubtedly the best course for Joe to follow. Joe, with Loser's pin prodding him in the same direction, was just about to crawl inside the mound through the narrow, culvertlike entryway, when a voice sang out from the other end of the oak grove: "Joe Doe! Is that you, Joe?"

"Yes," he shouted back with a sudden intense glow of gratitude and relief. "Yes, it is."

The Goddess Fortuna advanced, sequins atwinkle, wig swaying, toward the tattooing parlor with a dignity, or at least a strangeness, enhanced by the neon-blinking dusk of the grove. Trailing behind her, on leashes improvised from withies, stumbled the mumbling forms of Loser and P'ss, the one in autistic fugue, the other in a drunken stupor.

"I'm so glad I've found you!" the Goddess effused. "Mr. P'ss *said* you would be here, but he is scarcely the most reliable of guides in his present condition."

"Why, you're . . . you're . . ." Slowly, unsurely, Joe began to recall the main drift of his own narrative.

"The Goddess Fortuna," she prompted. "So I am. And I have brought you your own proper pin." With the decisive grace of a nurse removing a hypodermic from a patient's flesh, she pulled the entertainment pin from Loser's left earlobe. Then, before you could say "Ouch," she plucked Loser's pin from Joe's earlobe, replaced it with the pin she'd taken from Loser, and then tidied up the whole long confusion by restoring Loser's pin to his earlobe.

"Ouch," said Joe.

"What the f*ck," said Loser.

The Goddess turned to D**th and said, "I suppose I owe you some kind of explanation. You see, *this* young man"—indicating Joe—"is not who you thought he was. You thought he was *this* young man"—indicating Loser—"but, in fact, he is not. To my mind there is not even much of a resemblance, but be that as it may, the confusion is over, so I trust you will have no objection if Mr. Doe and I take our leave."

"Just one f*ck'ng minute," said D**th. "What do you think I am, a f*ck'ng imbecile? I know this f*ck'r ain't that f*ck'r. But he is sure as h'll a member of the Wild F*ck'ng Animals after he represented us at the F*ck'ng Tournament of Poses. His bros are not going to let him down now just 'cause some bimbo in a red dress wants to take him off into the f*ck'ng bushes."

"I resent that," said the Goddess.

"What I say," said C'nt, tilting his head sideways as a sign of distrust, "is that we leave it to Sh*t. If he considers himself a bro, he will go into the f*ck'ng parlor and let Tarantula Jack decorate his f*ck'ng lily-white skin. Whereas if he is not a bro, then I'll give him thirty f*ck'ng seconds to vanish into the f*ck'ng night with this scumbag and never return to Surewould Forest again."

"Fair enough," said D**th, after consulting his gums with what little was left of his matchstick. "What's it going to be, little bro?"

But there was no answer to this question, because already while these discussions were going on, Joe had gone into Tarantula Jack's to get tattooed.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Kiss of the Spideroid

As soon as he'd crawled inside the mound, Joe got to his feet, dusted off the knees of his grotty jeans from force of habit, and looked about uncertainly. The cavernous space was lighted by a single moth-haunted candle. A crust of candle wax encased an ancient beer bottle and formed a broad pool across the top of a rickety wooden table, as though candle after candle had burned here for years without anyone cleaning up. Beside the table were two chairs, but nowhere were there pictures of different tattoo possibilities—and what seemed stranger, there was no tattooist.

Then a trap door that Joe hadn't noticed popped open, and a very old man with long bony fingers and feathery white hair slowly emerged from the underground darkness, making loud creaking noises as he did so, though the creaking, Joe reasoned, must have been the creaking of the ladder he was climbing and not the creaking of his old bones.

"Ah, there you are," said the old man, after he let the trap door drop closed behind him. "You're . . . ?"

"Joe Doe," said Joe, offering his hand to be shaken.

As he shook Joe's hand, the old man revealed by the special way he did so that he, like Joe, was a troll.

"Oh!" said Joe, delighted to be meeting a real troll outside the Land of Dreams. "You're a—"

The old man shushed him by holding a long finger up to his lips and smiling significantly. It's one of the basic rules of trolldom never to *talk* about who is or who is not a troll.

"I'm Tarantula Jack," said the old troll. "And you"—he laid his finger on the middle of Joe's chest—"want a tattoo."

At once a large tarantula, which Joe had supposed was only a tattoo on the old man's forearm, skittered forward to touch Joe's chest with one of its long segmented legs. The tarantula's leg was of exactly the same length and thickness as Tarantula Jack's finger, though it was jet black while the finger was a pale yellowy white.

"Not so fast, my little wolffing," said the old troll, lifting his hand with the tarantula on it up to his face so that he could address the arachnid eye-to-eye. "First we must ask Mr. Doe what he is after. Then, if he truly wants a Confederate flag on his scr^tm, you may set to work."

"As a matter of fact," said Joe, "that's not the sort of thing I had in mind. Thanks just the same."

Defiantly, the disappointed tarantula spun around to face Joe, lifted its head to show its fangs, which were sharp as needles and half an inch long, and stridulated expressively. Then it leapt down to the floor of the mound and scuttered away into the darkness.

Tarantula Jack sighed. "She does carry on. It's not as though that many customers ever do want their scr^tms worked on. Who's to see it, after all? But try and reason with a tarantula. So—what *do* you have in mind?"

"Well, you see," said Joe, "I'm in love and—"

"Say no more," said Tarantula Jack. He gave a special

whistle and held out his hand. Down a silken thread of its own swift spinning, another tarantula lowered itself from the ceiling above. As Joe watched it descend, a moth flew into the candle's flame, and by the flare of its d^th he saw that the entire interior of the mound—its walls, ceiling, and crossbeams—were covered with a solid, swaying, trembling mass of tarantulas.

"My gosh," said Joe. "You sure have a lot of tarantulas here."

"In point of fact," said Tarantula Jack, "they're not really tarantulas. The true Italian tarantula never grows to more than three-quarters of an inch. My little helpers are spiders of the family Mygates, but even that's not strictly accurate, since they've been genetically re-engineered to the degree that one must say that they're not spiders but spideroids. Still, they look like tarantulas, and they act, on the whole, like tarantulas, and *they* much prefer to be called tarantulas. For that matter, so do I. I wouldn't want to be called Spideroid Jack."

"I know what you mean," said Joe. I've had a lot of trouble here in Surewould Forest with people wanting to call me names that aren't really mine."

"Such as the name on the jacket you're wearing now?"

"Exactly," said Joe.

"Then why don't you take the jacket off, and we'll start to work. My little Herzelielie can't keep her fangs retracted much longer—can you, my dear?"

The huge spideroid perched on the back of his hand shuddered in agreement.

With a sense at once of relief and of trepidation Joe took off the sleeveless jacket with Sh^t's name embroidered on it, exposing the bandaged wound on the left side of his chest.

"This may hurt," said Tarantula Jack, as he ripped off the bandage, "but just pretend it doesn't."

The sight of the raw wound or the smell of blood greatly excited Herzelielie, who reared up on her back legs and began stroking her fine abdominal hairs in anticipation. Transferring the eager spideroid to his shoulder, whence she clambered to the top of his head to crouch in a nest of fine white hair, Tarantula Jack undid the thongs of a small leather purse that had been hanging from his belt. He reached into the purse gingerly and removed a spider—or, likelier, a spideroid—much smaller than Herzelielie, scarcely as large as a plump lima bean. Then he crushed the arachnid with his thumbnail and smeared its juices on Joe's chest, just above the open wound. At once Herzelielie leapt from the old troll's head to Joe's chest and sank her fangs into the flesh that had been spiced so much to her liking.

"You see," the tattooist explained as Joe, with his chin tucked to his chest, watched Herzelielie uneasily, "the little spideroid was a male. It's the smell of the spermatic fluid from his crushed palpi that so arouses Herzelielie. Each time she attacks your flesh it's as though she were killing another male, which is the way spiders breed, you know, and why the males are generally so much smaller. It gives them a sporting chance to sneak away after they've accomplished the female's impregnation."

As the spideroid retracted her fangs, a short curved

line formed in Joe's flesh. Herzelielbe repositioned herself delicately and bit again.

"Surprisingly," the old troll continued, "the major difficulty in retooling the genetic material is not teaching them the patterns they work from. Their mating rituals are easily adapted to that purpose. It's much trickier to get them to produce ink of various hues in place of venom. There is still a residual venomous component in some of the brighter reds that may trigger brief spells of paralysis, but the red that Herzelielbe uses is entirely nontoxic."

"That's good to know," said Joe, and he winced as Herzelielbe retracted her fangs and at once sank them in again, continuing the curve of her would-be mating dance along a sinking trajectory.

"Best not to watch her, you know," Tarantula Jack advised. "If you direct your attention anywhere else, the pain is much less noticeable. For instance, what plans have you made for after you're done here?"

"My, uh, my plans. Uh, uh . . ."

"No doubt you'll want to visit the young lady you're in love with."

"Right. That's my plan."

"What is her name?"

"Artemesia Albatross," Joe replied without hesitation. For a moment, just saying her name made him forget about the spideroid busy at its labor on his chest.

"Artemesia—that's an interesting name," said the troll, in a soothing tone. "How do you spell it?"

Good as Joe had gotten at reading, his spelling was still pretty iffy. After the first three letters he had to admit that the rest was all guesswork, whereupon, as though to punish him, Herzelielbe's fangs connected with a nerve, like the nerve a dentist will sometimes hit when he's drilling your teeth, and Joe, who was still hypersensitive from the cocktail of various chemicals in his system, let loose a scream that started with the letter E and progressed through all the vowels of the alphabet, ending with Y.

"Why do I ask about your plans—is that what you mean?" the troll asked, sponging Joe's brow with a blood-speckled sanitary napkin. "From curiosity mostly. And then, you know, an old geezer like me is always full of elder wisdom and sage advice."

Either by the tone of his voice or by the way he dabbed with the napkin, Joe understood that Tarantula Jack was reminding him that as a fellow troll he was bound to offer Joe any assistance in his power. So, forgetting all about Herzelielbe, Joe laid out his basic problem, which was how to get over the wall surrounding Surewould Forest without using one of the official exits.

"Over the wall, you say, or just to the other side?"

"Either, I suppose," said Joe.

"Well, if you had wings," the tattooist observed, "you could fly over it."

"Right. But I don't have wings."

"Or if you had a gun, you might shoot your way out, should you be challenged by an usher demanding your pin back."

"I suppose so, but that's really not my style. D**th might do that, but I'm not D**th."

"And just as well too. As I see it, Joe, if you can't go over the wall, and you can't bulldoze your way through it, there's only one other option."

"What's that?" asked Joe, even though he'd guessed the answer.

"You must go under it."

"Is there a way to do that?"

"Yes," said the troll, "though it involves going through sewers and heating ducts and abandoned library stacks and old subway tunnels. But I'll draw a map for you, as soon as the tattooing is finished, and you shouldn't have any trouble at all, if you can read."

"Oh, I can read all right," said Joe, wincing as Herzelielbe hit another nerve.

The spideroid retracted her fangs and skittered back to survey her work from the vantage point of Joe's right nipple. She looked up to the tattooist for approval.

"Very good, my darling. Very good indeed." He held up a mirror so Joe could see the tattoo.

"The letters in it are all backwards," Joe objected.

Herzelielbe stridulated indignantly.

"That's because you're looking in a mirror."

"Oh," said Joe. Then, as he figured out what Tarantula Jack had said and realized that he was right, he also realized that it was exactly the tattoo he wanted and said, "Hey, that's great!"

Herzelielbe lifted her right front leg and wiggled it, which Joe assumed was the nearest spideroid equivalent to a thumbs-up. Then she jumped onto Tarantula Jack's arm and crawled contentedly up to his shoulder and over his collar and down into his shirt to nestle in the old man's armpit, secure in the confidence that all her eggs had been made fertile and that further generations of spideroids might flourish and tattoo further generations of lovestruck young men.

Chapter Twenty-Three

D**th of an Old Lady

Just as Tarantula Jack had got done drawing and explaining the map that would lead Joe out to Innacity under Surewould Forest's wall, there was a rumpus outside the mound and then a few moments later inside it as Alecō, the Witch of Decency, her white dress soiled and wrinkled from having had to squeeze through the narrow entrance, burst into the tattooing parlor with a loud cry of "Stop everything right now!"

At the sight of her upraised golden ruler Tarantula Jack stepped back in dismay—and stood right on top of the trap door that Joe had been about to use on his way under the wall.

"So you thought you could escape, did you?" the witch asked, with a grimace and a cackle and a squint. "You thought you could just walk out of your cage? You thought justice and honor and decency were dead?"

"As a matter of fact," said Joe, "it wasn't that hard to escape. The cage didn't have a bottom, so I only had to

tip it over to get out. Anyhow, as I think I said back then, you had no call putting me into a cage."

"Oh, didn't I!"

"No," said Joe. "There are lots of people in Surewould Forest who use the sort of language that seems to upset you, and no one fusses them at all."

"And are *you* one of those people?" she demanded with a sneer, prodding the fresh bandage that covered both his wound and his tattoo. "Do you think you're exempt from the rules of the golden ruler?"

"Where is my jacket?" Joe asked Tarantula Jack.

Tarantula Jack handed Joe his jacket, and Joe put it on, making sure Alecto saw the gang's name on the back of the jacket and Sh*t's name on the front. For the first time the jacket actually felt like it fit.

Alecto shrieked with rage and at the same moment D**th entered the tattooist's mound and grimaced into the murk. "Hey, what's up, Sh*t? Sounds like you're having yourself some f*ck'ng fun."

At the sight of D**th and the sound of his voice, Alecto shrieked again, but in a different way and not so loud and less from rage than from dismay.

One by one the other bikers and their old ladies—F*ck, P*ss, C*nt, N*k*, Loser, Wh*r*, B*tch, T*ts, and s*—followed D**th inside the mound. The old ladies had been scoring tricks most of the afternoon at the Dorkery and were looking washed and out of sorts.

"Who's the fat sc*mb*g?" C*nt asked, glaring at Alecto. It really was hard to see anything at all by the light of just one candle.

"Will you all kindly *remove* yourselves," said Alecto, mustering all her dignity and pointing to the low doorway with her ruler at just the moment the Goddess Fortuna came wiggling in through it.

There were now fourteen people inside the tattooing parlor, and it was shoulder to shoulder and back to belly as much for the people milling about on the floor as for the spideroids on the walls and ceiling.

"Well, I'll be f*ck*d," said D**th. "If it ain't Dishonor Mud!"

Alecto looked to the right and to the left, but this was not a place or a situation you could leave from in a hurry, especially if you were fat and the people around you weren't cooperative, which she was and the other thirteen weren't.

She made one last attempt to exercise her authority. "Leave now—all of you but Mr. Palooka. No one else need be punished. This is strictly between himself and me. He was apprehended for using Rough Talk of a sort that cannot be tolerated in the precincts of this forest, and his mouth must be washed out with Fels-Naphtha. I have the bar right here and—"

"And I got something for you too, honeybuns—right *here!*" D**th grabbed his crotch good-naturedly and winked at Alecto.

She glared at him. "I think you are making a mistake." "Hey, cut the crap, Mudpie. Don't you recognize me? I'm your old man—I'm D**th!"

Alecto backed away from D**th until she'd backed into the wooden table and had to stop.

"F*ck'ng h*ll, baby, I thought you was dead, you and our little Gonorrhil. I saw your f*ck'ng coffins buried in the f*ck'ng ground. What the f*ck is going on?"

"I do not know what you're talking about and I insist that—"

"You don't know what the f*ck I'm talking about? Well, I'll *show* you what the f*ck I'm talking about!"

D**th spun Alecto around and pushed her face down on the table. Then he lifted her skirts to reveal a tattoo on her right b*t*cks—and, in addition, the horrified face of the lady dwarf. Coughdrop gave a cry that was partly fear and partly warning and clutched the front of Alecto's skirt about herself in a futile effort to remain concealed.

D**th swatted the tattoo on Alecto's b*t*cks and set it quivering. Under a skull and crossbones identical with that on the back of the hand that had slapped her was the name by which D**th had addressed her: Dishonor Mud.

"She was Buddy Mud's youngest daughter," D**th explained. "She was brought up somewhere out of town, and I raped her the very first day she came to work at the Mud Puddle Club. We came here right afterwards, and she got this here tattoo to match mine. F*ck'ng h*ll, that was about the most memorable f*ck'ng piece of s* I ever had. And it wasn't so bad for you either, was it, honeybuns?"

When Alecto made no reply, D**th leaned down and kissed her tattoo cajolingly. "Hey, baby, come on. You been missing from action for fifteen f*ck'ng years. Don't you think I deserve some kind of explanation?"

"If she's too ch*ck*nsh*t to say what happened, then I guess it's up to me," said Wh*r*, stepping forward to light a joint at the candle. "You see, after Miss Mud here joined the Old Ladies' Auxiliary, she never left off b'll-sh*t'ng us how she was too good for the likes of us underclass types. She came from this town in f*ck'ng Ohio or somewhere called Decency, and that was supposed to make her special. I kept telling her to buy a f*ck'ng return ticket if she didn't like our company, but she was scared what you'd do if she left and you caught up with her. So we arranged this accident with the roller coaster. Dishonor and Gonorrhil never was in the car that crashed, just a pair of f*ck'ng store-window dummies. Trouble is, we never figured anyone would be in the second car. When Boozer and Lucy got into it, it was too late. I felt real f*ck'ng sad about that, but what you going to do?"

While Wh*r* had been relating this tale, Coughdrop had surreptitiously pulled down her mother's skirts so that her backside was no longer indecently exposed and so that Coughdrop was herself again hidden from the gaze of curiosity, though the glint of her own curious eyes could be glimpsed from time to time as she would peek out from under the hem.

"Hot d*mn!" Joe exclaimed at the end of Wh*r*'s story. "That means I don't have to marry Coughdrop!"

"What do you mean?" said Alecto—or Dishonor, as we must now think of her. She pushed herself up from the table with as much dignity as she could muster. "You still have to be married by midnight. That's Destiny, and Destiny is inalterable."

"Oh, I may get married all right, and I hope I do. But—"

not to Coughdrop. Because she *isn't* Coughdrop—she's Gonorrhil. And Gonorrhil was engaged to marry Loser before he was even born." Joe turned to D**th. "Isn't that what you told me?"

"F*ck'ng A," D**th concurred. "Don't you remember, honeybuns? The night you and me and Boozer and Lucy all got p'ss'd at your dad's place and the four of us swore that if the kid in Lucy's belly turned out to be a f*ck'ng boy, then he would marry our Gonorrhil someday."

Dishonor hung her head and whispered, "I remember."
"So where is Gonorrhil?" D**th asked.

In answer Dishonor lifted her skirts and in a hoarse whisper bade Coughdrop come out and meet the man to whom she had been, all unknown to herself, betrothed to marry these many years and whom, by a strange coincidence, she had laid under the enchantment of the nonsense curse earlier that day.

But the lady dwarf was no longer to be found beneath the witch's wide skirts, for she had crawled out from that covert and stood now atop the rickety wooden table. Lighted from below by the single guttering candle flame, the features of her angry face seemed more than ever grotesque.

"Thay it ihnt' tho, Mother," Coughdrop implored the disgraced witch. "Thay you are not . . ." She could not bring herself to pronounce the detested name.

"It is all too true, dear child. Before I became a witch, before I went to Duke University to study parapsychology, I was this man's concubine. My name is"—she shuddered and buried her head in her hands—"Dishonor Mud. And your little hand has been promised, as he claims, to the son of Boozer and Lucy. I have sworn a solemn oath."

"No!" Coughdrop's eyes rolled wildly. "It muht not be!" Her hands clawed at the beribboned bodice of her dimid dress. Then, bethinking herself, she reached into the pocket of that dress and took out the Plays-Kool "Queen Mary" Professional Head-Chopper, with which she had lately beheaded the unfortunate Miss Lavinia Simpkins. Responsive to the young enchantress's rage, the toy axe burgeoned to full one-to-one scale, even as the desperate lady dwarf raised it above her head and brought it down with all the force at her command, cleaving the skull of Dishonor Mud in two and spattering the horrified onlookers with gouts of blood.

"Tho much for your tolelmn old oath!" Coughdrop screamed at the witch's lifeless body, where it lay crumpled on the floor. "I thought you were a detent, thelf-rethpecting witch, not thome dihtgratheful thcarlet wom-an conthoring with the thcum of the earth. Your oath meanth *no*b'ing to me! That man"—she pointed her supernumerary finger at Joe—"wath promithed to me for my huthband and I will *bave* him for my huthband. And nothing can thtop me—nothing!"

Coughdrop jumped from the tabletop onto her mother's corpse and burrowed under its inert mass until she had found the golden ruler in its white sheath. "Thith ith mine now," she purred, wiping beads of blood from the white plastic of the sheath. "And all ith power ith mine, and by ith power *I* will make the ruleth from now on."

She turned to Joe and hissed, "Thee you at midnight, thwethearth!" She lifted the ruler above her head. "Ath for the retht of you, my curtheth on you all!"

With a flourish of the golden ruler and the mumbling of a magic spell, the matricidal lady dwarf disappeared in a puff of menthol-scented smoke.

D**th knelt down before Dishonor. "Was that our daughter?" he demanded of his dead old lady. Wiping a tear from his eye, he continued, in blank verse:

"Was that dear little Gonorrhil, whose round Pink bottom I would diaper with my own Bandanas? Can it be? The darling child Who rode inside my studded saddlebags Ten thousand miles and never made a peep? Whom I, a monster of depravity, Would dandle on my handlebars till she Would fall asleep, to whisper as she dreamed, 'D**th is my dear Papa.' Has innocence An end like this? That little suckers should Grow up to slay their dams and render thanks For mother-love with matricidal pranks! Ye gods who see this guiltless mother slain, Revenge her d**th with everlasting pain!"

While D**th ranted on, the other bikers and their old ladies looked away in embarrassment from the ignoble spectacle of their leader, warlord, and spiritual guide sounding off like some soliloquy in a Shakespeare play, and not even one of his mature tragedies but the fustian of the Bard's best-forgotten youth.

"If it'll make you feel any better," said Wh*r*, "I can guarantee you that wasn't Dishonor's daughter, though I guess she thought she was. See, I pulled a switch just before the roller coaster accident. I was glad to be getting rid of Dishonor, but I figured the kid was your flesh and blood as much as hers. So while I was taking her home from her day care center, which was a job that Dishonor was usually too spaced to handle by five in the afternoon, I switched her with another kid the same age that I was looking after for my sister Carbonara."

"Didn't Dishonor or Carbonara ever notice that their kids had changed?" Joe asked. "I mean, Coughdrop must have been sort of unusual even back then."

"Like I said, Dishonor was so strung out she wouldn't have noticed if I'd brought home a f*ck'ng puppy. And Carbonara was glad to get rid of the freak, so she wasn't going to look a gift horse in the f*ck'ng proverbial mouth."

"So what happened to *my* f*ck'ng daughter?" D**th demanded, getting back on his feet and starting to act like a biker again, to the relief of all his gang. "Where is she now?"

Wh*r* shrugged. "Dunno. She ran off when she was fourteen. Said she wanted to get into the entertainment industry. Don't we all. So if you ever f*ck a chick who's got a little *fish* tattooed on the back of her right earlobe, it's a good bet that you've just had incest with your long-lost daughter."

At this final locking-into-place of the last jigsaw

piece, the Goddess Fortuna fainted into the arms of Loser. Her red wig tumbled from her head. Her sequined shopping bag fell from her hands.

"Do you suppose . . ." D**th began.

"There's only one way to find out," said Tarantula Jack, stooping down and twisting the unconscious Goddess's earlobe around to discover the tiny fish that one of his own spideroids had tattooed into her infant flesh so many years ago.

"D**th," Tarantula Jack announced solemnly, "this is your true daughter."

"And she's a Goddess," said D**th in a hushed voice. "A f*ck'ng Goddess!"

"And she's engaged to me!" said Loser brightly. "Hey, that's terrific."

There was a great hubbub then as the bikers suggested various remedies to revive the Goddess Fortuna, remedies they did not refrain from sampling themselves. Under the cover of all this conviviality Joe slipped away, with Tarantula Jack's help, through the trap door under the table and down the creaking ladder into the darkness where we will soon accompany him. Before we do, however, let us linger a while longer in the parlor of the spideroids to witness one last noteworthy turn of events.

When the Goddess Fortuna woke up, her first thought was for her dead mother. She knelt down beside the great bulk of the murdered witch—and recoiled in horror.

"What is this," asked Wh*r*, squatting beside her.

A closer vantage revealed what the dim candlelight obscured. Dishonor's corpse had been transformed, in the few minutes since her d**th, into a featureless black compost.

"Well, as the saying goes," said Wh*r*, with a final sneer for her one-time rival for D**th's love, "it's dust to dust, ashes to ashes, and Mud to mud."

Hearing these cruel words, the Goddess—if, indeed, she could still lay claim to that dignity—fled in tears from the tattooist's mound. Loser followed her at once, calling her newly rediscovered name: "Gonorrhil! Gonorrhil, wait!"

"Hey, man," P**ss called out jovially after the infatuated young biker. "Let her go, bro—she'll be back. They all come back. Have a swig of this, and then—" He had got halfway out the burrowlike exit from the mound when his day's intake caught up with him once again—he was a diabetic and really ought not to have drunk so much—and he passed out, vomiting gently.

Within the mound the remaining contingent of the Wild F*ck'ng Animals and their Old Ladies' Auxiliary began to party—all but C*nt, who now was able to seize the chance he'd been waiting for. With the razor-sharp blade that had slit open so many other pockets and purses, C*nt sliced open the leather bag that hung from the old tattooist's belt. But instead of the expected rush of coins into his waiting palm there was a tumble of tiny, fear-crazed male spideroids.

"What the f*ck!" C*nt flung up his hand, and the spideroids were hurled broadcast over the partying bikers

and their old ladies, who quite naturally and instinctively started to swat at each bite and tickle.

"Don't!" warned Tarantula Jack. "Let them bite you—don't swat them."

Too late. Already the aroused females were descending in a rain of silken threads from the ceiling and crossbeams above. Already they skittered down the walls and across the floors to swarm upon the steaming feast of male fluids where they were squashed into the flesh of the Wild F*ck'ng Animals and their Old Ladies' Auxiliary, a succulent invitation to begin their dance.

Wh*r* was the first to bolt for the exit—and the first to discover the cork of P**ss's body sealing them inside the mound, prey to the spideroid horde. At first, as you might well suppose, she was horrified at the fate she foresaw, but then, as she'd done so often before in other situations almost as unpleasant, she thought, "What the f*ck," and gritted her teeth and tried to enjoy the inevitable.

Chapter Twenty-Four

The Wall and the Worm

The wall was a symbol.

That much must be clear to all of us, even without capitalizing the W. But of what? you may ask. Obviously of something that must be overcome or gotten to the other side of, since this would be a pretty miserable story if there was a wall in it and everyone just stayed tamely inside it, like people inside a ghetto who are all going to be exterminated unless they bust loose and then they *don't*. That would be a downer, wouldn't it? However, one of the rules of writing books these days is that I as a writer can't tell you as a reader what any given symbol symbolizes, since then it would lose its effectiveness and the story wouldn't have a happy ending. Happy endings, you see, are the result of the force of the Collective Unconscious focusing on a story and helping the hero along and giving him the strength he needs to succeed. It's a little like the way the audience is able to keep Tinkerbell alive when they go to see the play *Peter Pan* and clap for her. You the readers have to want Joe to get to the other side of that wall, and you've collectively got to be thinking *I hope he does it, I really hope he does*. If there is a single reader who feels otherwise, Joe might well be defeated in his attempt. That's the basic reason for not going into detail as to what the wall is a symbol of, since once you start spelling such things out, there will always be some jerk who belongs to a political party or has signed on with some dumb cult, and he'll think his party or his cult has to be against whatever your symbol is symbolizing. Whereas if it's all left a little misty and vague, he'll just follow the main thrust of the story along with everyone else, and there will be no problem, none anyhow that we can't count on Joe to solve in the natural course of his quest for love and fulfillment.

So we'll just agree, shall we, that the wall is a wall

and nothing but that, and that Joe has to get to the other side of it. Anyhow, if you're clever enough, you'll figure out what the wall is a symbol of without any help from me.

So where were we? More to the point, where was Joe? He was in the dark, winding caverns underneath Surewould Forest, bumping his head against stalactites, which come down from the *ceiling*, because there is a C in stalactite, and barking his shins against stalagmites, which grow up from the *ground* like giant upside-down tumpts, because stalagmite has a G. The map that Tarantula Jack had drawn was proving not to be of much practical value, since even with the help of his n*c'l**r-powered cigarette lighter Joe couldn't tell which of the squiggles on the map corresponded to which of the twists and turns of the clammy stone walls he was feeling his way along in the dark.

After considerable stumbling and bumbling Joe remembered that he still had the book the old wise owl had given him and he decided to see if there was any more useful advice forthcoming from that quarter. But the next page of the book was entirely cryptic:

If from Quite you take a Q,
Dial 911-1912.

Q was a letter Joe didn't have much use for. He knew that it stood for Quinella and started off the word Quiz, which were only two different possibilities for losing from his point of view. But it you took a Q from "Quite," what you'd be left with was "uite," which so far as he could see didn't make a scrap of sense. Clearly, this was not yet the moment to be dialing 911-1912.

Neither did it seem like a good idea to call Rothbart Silverbowl again, since he worked for the company that ran Surewould Forest, and Joe had got the feeling from Artemesia that what he was doing was somehow outside the rules—or why couldn't he leave by an official exit? Truly, he was in the dark.

The stone wall twisted around and bent, and Joe found himself going down a steep staircase and then crawling through a very low tunnel that had a funny smell, as tunnels often do, and then slipping about in something slimy but completely odorless, and then going down a kind of ramp that led to a door that had a sign on it that said:

X COLLECTION
Authorized Personnel Only

The X on the sign was what Joe was looking for, since Tarantula Jack had made the same mark on his map. The door was locked, but it looked like an easy enough lock to pick. This time Joe didn't try to use his entertainment pin for that purpose. Instead he used the shaft of the Robin Hood Flower brand arrow that was stuck through his hat. He fiddled it this way and that, and after just a bit of fiddling he was inside the X Collection.

Dying fluorescent lights illuminated the scene erratically like flickerings of far-off lightning. Shelves of dusty

books—or of dust that had once been books—stretched on through the gloom and disappeared into the blackness. There must have been a million volumes, or a billion, every one of which had been removed from the shelf of a bookstore or a library by proud, intolerant Censors and sent here to the X Collection, where all the banned books of the world had been warehoused for over a thousand years.

At the sound of Joe's footsteps in the dusty valley formed by two opposing stacks of shelves, the banned books rustled and coughed and then commenced to sing the following song:

Song of the Banned

O stop a while and read us,
O tarry here and learn
The reasons you should heed us
And why libraries burn:

How wicked Galileo
And Darwin bold as brass
Bewitched old Santa Fe O
To think the sky a gas,

Or else they wrote that dragons
Do not exist, and so
Our church's Welcome Wagons
Are nothing but a show.

Now as we sigh and molder
And turn from print to clay,
You too are growing older
And dumber by the day.

Dear readers, books do need you,
So think—and do not burn
The books that could have freed you,
The books by which you learn.

Joe would have stopped and looked at one of the poor banned books, just to be polite, if there had been more time. But there wasn't. So he continued along the route laid out by his map, first past the shelves of books labeled "Science," where some of the very oldest books in the X Collection were kept, including the books by the two scientists mentioned in the song the books had been singing. Then he turned right into the aisle labeled "Psychology," where there were books by Joy's Brothers, Dr. Freud and Dr. Reich, whom Joe could remember from D. M. Thomas's poem, and other books by psychologists who had maintained that intelligence was something you inherited from your parents. Those books had been banned by Censors who had strong personal convictions that this could not be so; presumably, they were very bright, or thought they were, and wanted to have the credit for themselves. Most everyone does go through a stage of thinking himself or herself much brighter than his or her parents, but only these Censors had been able to do something about that perception. Then Joe turned

left along "Carpentry and Plumbing" and left again down the aisle of books banned from various grade school and junior high libraries, such as *Mary Poppins* and *Huckleberry Finn* and *The Weird World of Worms*.

If Joe had only stopped a moment to read the first chapter of *The Weird World of Worms*, he would have learned an interesting fact about the word "worm." Worms weren't always the little squiggly things you dig up in the garden to squish onto fishhooks. Long, long ago in the first book ever written in English, which is called *Beowulf*, the word "worm" meant dragon. A fact of interest not only from a philological angle but because at this moment there was a real, live dragon—or, more precisely, a giant bookworm—around the next bend of the aisle, where fiction was shelved.

It was not, as dragons go, a very large dragon, only about half again as tall as Joe, though quite large for a worm. Like many other animals that live underground it was blind, though there were large, goggling vestigial eyes on each of its three heads. Its underbelly was decorated with a long double row of palps that resembled tiny palsied hands. The dragon would grasp the books on which it fed with these palps and then secrete a fluid from its blind, white eyes onto them. This initiated its complex digestive process. Once the books, otherwise poisonous to the dragon, were reduced by this means to a lumpy white paste, the dragon would lower one of its three heads and snuffle the paste up into its ever-pulsating maw.

If you had approached close enough to one of the dragon's maws and peered into its gullet, you would have observed long ranks and files of small, sharp teeth. These teeth bore a resemblance to the fangs exhibited by Tarantula Jack's spideroids—for the good reason that they had been scavenged from generations of dead spideroids. For years Tarantula Jack had been flushing the corpses of his insect helpers down the toilet, and for years the toilet's defective plumbing had deposited the dead insects and other waste matter in the periodicals room of the X Collection. There they had formed a compost with ancient copies of *Hustler* and *High Times* and *Partisan Review*, and in this compost hordes of ordinary bookworms had pululated comfortably for centuries. Then, with the latest increment from Tarantula Jack's toilet—namely, the muddy remains of the Witch of Decency—a startling metamorphosis had taken place. The compost quaked and shuddered and drew itself into a coherent shape—and Alecto lived again.

Not as a witch, not as anything in human form, but as the tricatepitate—or three-headed—dragon I have just described. Now, as a dragon, Alecto went about her usual witchy business, lurching about the library stacks in search of enemies to attack and food to devour. No longer did she have to make up rules for people to break before she launched an attack. As a dragon she could dispense with such formalities. She could just grab, and when she saw the enemy she hated more than any other—namely, Joe—come round the corner into the fiction section, that's exactly what she did.

Joe reacted nimbly. When the dragon grabbed, he

jabbed. The Trac III arrowhead tipping the shaft of the Robin Hood Flower Brand arrow sliced into the dragon's white skin, and a few droplets of clear fluid leaked out, like glue from the rubber lips of a glue bottle. This didn't seem to slow the dragon down, unfortunately. Joe jerked back on the shaft of the arrow, but the dragon used powerful muscles inside its body to pull the other way. Inch by inch the arrow was resorbed into its own wound. Inch by inch Joe's resisting hands were drawn closer to the wiggling palps in the belly of the beast. "Gimme," the palps seemed to be saying, "gimme, gimme."

Joe let go of the arrow and the dragon stumbled backwards. He considered beating a retreat, but ahead of him at the end of the long prospect of banned novels was a door marked IND, and that, according to Tarantula Jack's map, was the next place he had to get to. So dragon or no dragon, Joe decided, the thing to do was plunge ahead.

This seemed to be the dragon's idea as well, once it was upright again. First with one head, then with another, and then with a third, it struck out blindly in the direction dictated by the sensitive, moist meat-sensors in the soft palates of its three pulsating maws. Though the meat-sensors were reasonably accurate, the dragon had only lately sprung to life from the compost in the Periodicals Room and its muscular coordination was still poor. It kept banging its heads into the metal shelves and into each other, making a strange, melancholy ululation at each such collision.

Joe, though he had meant to advance, found himself being gradually forced backwards, for though the dragon was clumsy it was also large and it pretty well filled the aisle between the stacks of books. Joe figured if he could use the bookshelves as a kind of ladder, he'd be able to climb up beyond the striking range of the dragon's heads, but there was never time to mount up more than a couple shelves before one of the d'm'n'd heads lunged at him, chittering its fangs and leaking digestive juices hungrily from its wide, white eyes.

Joe, as I pointed out earlier, was the kind of person who doesn't get angry quickly and who doesn't know he's gotten angry until he's completely furious. Which by now he was. If he'd had a sword, which is the usual equipment for dealing with dragons, he would have hacked the d'm'n'd thing to pieces with indiscriminate fury. But he hadn't been provided with a sword, so he reached for the nearest thing to hand, which naturally enough was a banned book. Its title, which Joe was able to read almost at a glance, was *Animal Farm*, and it had been banned from the Public Library of Decency, Ohio, at the insistence of Dishonor Mud's great-great-grandfather, Hud Mud, a pig farmer whose views were highly respected in Decency. Hud had maintained at a meeting of the library's Board of Censors that younger members of F.P.F.O., the Future Pig Farmers of Ohio, would have been irreparably disturbed by the book's entirely unfair and unrealistic picture of pig farming, and so it had been banned and sent here to the X Collection. Joe threw this disturbing book with all his might into the maw of the dragon's middle head, knocking loose the en-

circling fangs and puncturing the meat-sensor in its soft palate. With a low hissing sound, a thin brown gruel trickled down the spine of the book and out of the dragon's maw. The blind eyes closed. The head fell limp.

"One down, two to go," said Joe, reaching for more literary ammunition, as the other two heads of the dragon belched with rage.

Into the maw of the right-hand head Joe threw a copy of Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*; and into the maw of its left-hand head a first edition of James Joyce's *Ulysses*. These were two of the most famous banned books of all time, and it's a shame their authors couldn't have been on hand to see the results their novels had on the dragon that had once been Alecto. It writhed and snorted and gabbled and burped and got the dry heaves and then lay on its back and strangled on the brown bilge leaking from its ruptured meat-sensors.

Ding-dong! thought Joe with a general all-purpose sense of elation and a particular glow of gratitude toward the art of the novel. He had just lifted his foot to step triumphantly over the corpse of his vanquished foe when, with a spasm of still-living hate, his vanquished foe arched its dying body and caught hold of his foot with its strong palps. Joe sprawled forward on the library aisle and watched in horror as the dragon's palps drew his foot by a kind of peristaltic action toward a fourth and heretofore unsuspected supernumerary maw, which was not on any of its heads, where you'd think a maw would be, but right in the middle of its body, where its belly button would have been if it had been human, which it was not.

Joe groped about on the lowest library shelves, but all the books that had been shelved here had been paperback novels printed on the poorest stock of paper. They had turned to dust hundreds of years ago. But what was this? To the touch it seemed a soft, slippery brick, and it had the smell of a janitor's closet. Whatever it was, Joe made a wish and bent double as though he were doing sit-ups and rammed the bar of Fels-Naphtha Soap—for that's what it was, as you probably guessed, the very bar of soap that Alecto had set aside on purpose to wash out Joe's mouth—into the gaping, supernumerary maw in the middle of the dragon's body. There was a rumbling sound inside and then out of the convulsing gullet rushed a thick yellow lather of suds, like the bubbles that come out of the top of a washer when you put in too much detergent.

As the body of the dragon began to inflate, Joe pulled his foot free from the quivering palps and bolted for the exit to the IND, which is an abbreviation for Independent Subway, in case you didn't know. He had just got through the door and into the first car of the downtown-bound n°cl**r-powered bullet train when he heard the gigantic POP! of the dragon as it burst like a piñata and showered the library stacks with millions of tiny semi-literate tracts urging the abolition of all theaters in Elizabethan London. Alecto was now completely and truly dead, having been reduced to her atomic components, and Joe, with all you readers helping, had made it safe and sound to the other side of the wall.

To be concluded

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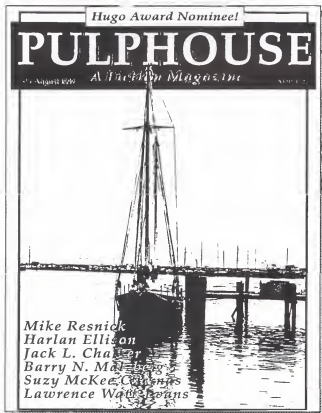
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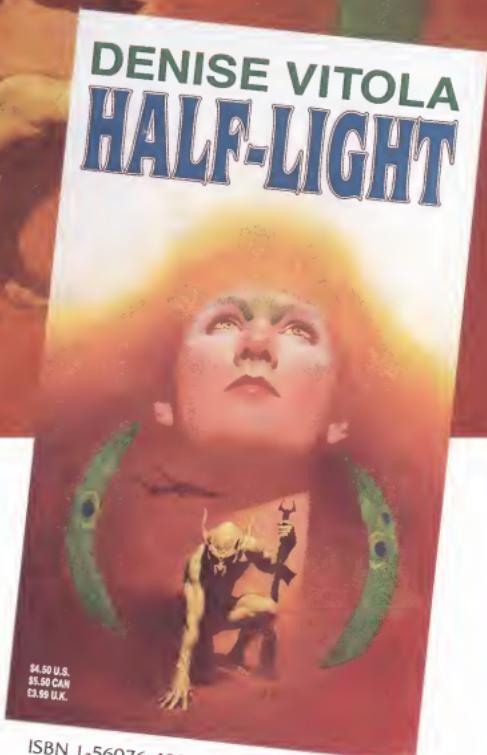
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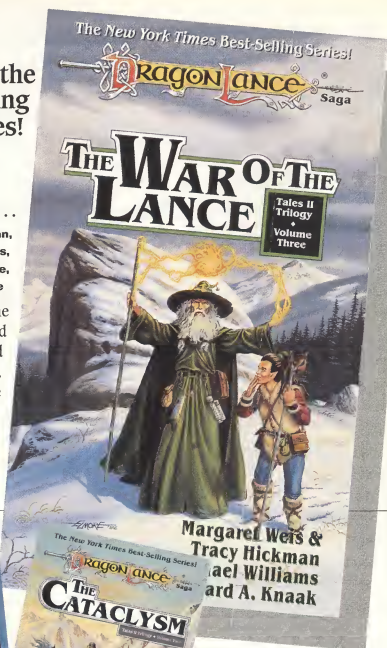
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